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Abstract

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Spectatorial Distanciation in *Memories of Underdevelopment*

by Matt Rossoni

A cinematic collage, Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) combines narrative, documentary, and also third cinema to instigate and recollect the memories of its protagonist: Sergio. These representations of Sergio's history parallel those of the Cuban nation and openly invite criticism upon the bourgeoisie and the post-revolutionary state; yet any filmic commentary cannot devoid the spectator of self-incrimination. Employed are aesthetic and narrative mechanisms to create empathy for the protagonist, emulating modes of commercial continuity editing. Any form of identification is regularly interrupted through cinematically adapted Brechtian distanciation tactics. Combining the seemingly antithetical approaches of Brecht's epic theatre with tropes of diegetic absorption works to implicate the spectator into Sergio's consciousness, thereby giving any sudden breach to the viewer's sub-conscious identification a critical reflection: the purpose of which is to transform the audience's political sensibilities.

In Julianne Burton's interview with Gutierrez Alea he elaborates upon the function of Sergio. He states that:

[t]he film plays with . . . identification , trying to unsure that the viewer at first identifies with the character, despite his conventionality and his commitment to bourgeois ideology . . . [but] as the film progresses, one begins to perceive not only the vision that Sergio has of himself but also the vision that reality gives to us. (Interview 9)

To achieve this level of self-imposed criticism the film employs distancing effects that can be found in the Epic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht. The film not only uses these distancing tactics to remove the spectator from empathizing with Sergio, but also to make the spectator critically aware of the filmic apparatus. The ambitions of the Epic Theatre are almost identical with that of *Memories*.

Brecht's list compares the priorities of epic and dramatic theatre (though not listed in its entirety): an emphasis on narrative vs. plot; turning the spectator into an observer vs. implicating the spectator in a stage situation (adapted in filmic terms can mean diegetic situation); forcing him to make decisions vs. involving the spectator in something; and a sense of reason over feeling (Brecht 37). Brecht intended to be political, but nevertheless adapting these theatrical goals into cinematic tropes results in the constitution of an already established form: political modernism.

In a diegetically sealed narrative there is "[realist] text that assumes a normative status in its presumed transmission of "knowledge to a [viewer] whose position is stabilized through a discourse which is to varying degrees invisible" (Rodowick 12). In comparison to political modernism (and hence Epic Theatre) there is the "disturb[ance of] unity and self-presence of the [viewer] by discouraging identification and by drawing attention to the work of its own textual processes" (Rodowick 12). Simple textual examples are the titles of names used throughout the film, such as "Pablo" or "Elena". The immediate effect of such is separating the film into chapters of literature, thus proclaiming the medium's artifice. Yet another is that text more easily and directly states information than an attempt

by an actor, thus creating “a room full of experts” (Brecht 44). While the information provided, names of characters, is not overly revealing it preludes to later in the film when Sergio uses his typewriter, or more significantly, when he holds a newspaper detailing Kennedy’s sudden return to Florida. Visual text is but one trope: formal cognizance is begun far sooner than the distancing process of Sergio, though they employ many of the same tactics. It begins within the film’s exposition.

After the shot man is carried away there is a freeze-frame on a woman’s face: this freeze-frame immediately calls attention to itself as a formal device outside the diegesis. In the same manner, Brecht identified theatrical aspects that could be made independent of one another and thus halt spectatorial empathy, one of which is: “the moral tableau [that is] performed by the characters in the play . . . [and is] neither moralizing nor sentimental” (Brecht 38). The freeze-frame is used repeatedly throughout the film, such as when Sergio walks towards the camera. The effect is to not only halt diegetic temporality and realism, but to point out the formal nature of the film and thereby make the spectator consciously contemplate its purpose; it holds the image, signifying to the viewer that it is important and allowing time for thought process. In the case of the woman’s face being freeze-framed, the purpose is to make the “non-participatory spectators . . . consider their own role vis-à-vis the film which is about to unfold” (Burton, *Memories* 18). The freeze-frame effect is regularly expanded to a slideshow, which calls upon a different mode of critical thinking.

The slideshow, compared to the singular freeze-frame, is always accompanied with sound (usually dialogue). The dialogue often works as counter-point to the images, such as when, after kissing Elena and converting to a slideshow of both her and other Cuban women, Sergio’s voice-over reveals his notion that they are all ‘underdeveloped and have an inability to accumulate experience and to develop.’ The visuals are counter-point to the sound because the spectator, by being alienated via the slideshow effect, realizes that Sergio too is underdeveloped and unable to change. Another example, the slideshow of gaunt children and impoverished scenery, removes the spectator even further from diegetic participation (not discussing anything to do with Sergio) towards a militant role. This sequence is the most extreme use of third cinema in *Memories*.

As the slideshow operates Sergio again has a voice-over, but unlike other instances, he is not commentating on anything diegetic but is instead relaying statistics: ‘in Latin America four children die every minute due to illnesses caused by malnutrition.’ Even Sergio himself is no longer within the diegesis, but is acting as ‘the voice of God’; it is not counter-point because the dialogue is not binary to the images. This sequence is hyperbolic to Brechtian practice and also to political modernism’s camp because it is not provoking a viewer to “reason” its significance, but rather, it is explicitly stating it. It is working to “intervene in the situation as an element providing thrust or rectification” towards political transformation and away from colonialism/neo-colonialism within a bourgeois state (Getino and Solanas 47). Yet because the film was produced in 1968 (well after Castro’s Revolution), the sequence is of hunger in pre-revolutionary Cuba as well as Latin America as a whole.

The viewer then, is encouraged to use an almost cultural counter-point; comparing the negativity of the past with the state of the then-present. The state (*Memories* was produced by the ICAIC) openly invites criticism onto itself, just as Sergio doubts the future of the nation. Nevertheless,

the slideshow sequence of third cinema is different from the slideshow of Elena in that the photographs are real historical documents. There are other slideshows and not all are as fictional as Elena's sequence, or as militant as the third cinema sequence (such as prisoner beating, which while justified for critical reasoning, is not as militantly instructional). Implementing these media documents greatly changes the film in terms of its political and narrative legitimacy in a Brechtian manner dependent on the cinematic medium; it gives the film a concrete relation to historical reality.

Another aspect Brecht vows to make independent of its medium's specificity is that of setting (Brecht 38). Limited to a stage, he proposes using projections to alter the stage's setting and to provide visual aids (38). Here the cinema has a profound advantage in that its medium is the projection of images; but it also then has a disadvantage. It would not be innovative, or 'epic' enough to merely move the setting visually, as doing so would (in Brecht's terms) "implicate the spectator in a stage situation" (37) (cinematically replace stage with diegesis): that is done with a simple cut, so instead *Memories* alters the setting through temporal order in a highly complex manner oscillating documentary and narratively diegetic footage that broods narrative development/empathy, as well as creating distanciation/reasoning opportunities.

To get to the point where Brechtian tactics can be used effectively on the masses, however, there has to be an apparatus to 'trance' the spectator into sub-conscious identification with Sergio. Brecht acknowledges the hold of a popular medium over the masses:

The apparatus is conditioned by the society of the day and only accepts what can keep it going in that society. We are free to discuss innovation which doesn't threaten its social function – that of providing an evening's entertainment. We are not free to discuss those which threaten to change its function, possibly by fusing it with the educational system or with the organs of mass communication. (34)

Thus *Memories* must at least somewhat engage its spectators in a format that is at least somewhat familiar lest it altogether alienate the viewer (with abstractions): the familiar apparatus is the narrative employed by commercial films in the United States (Getino and Solanas 41) and must be engaged with in order to carry the possibility of transformation among the masses. This leeching of familiar modes allows for "such a thing as pleasurable learning, cheerful and militant learning" (Brecht 73) when combined with Brechtian distanciation. Narrative and continuity editing are then a necessity that *Memories* actively uses to create empathy for Sergio: doing so makes the transportation out of diegetic time and space, to subjective worlds and to documentary sequences, all that much more alienating, whereby the spectator is in a better position to think critically of what is being shown.

Empathy for Sergio is reliant on both aesthetic and narrative devices. For instance, the film makes ample use of the shot/reverse-shot mechanism, though not often in the manner of conversation (where one character is always on the left and the other is always on the right no matter the camera's placement along the axis of action). When Sergio looks at Elena from outside the window in the Hemingway Museum, shot/reverse-shot is used between Sergio looking down, then the sight of what he is looking at, then back to his front. Doing so sutures the spectator into the completeness of the setting

(Dayan 30). Furthermore, the shot/ reverse-shot as in the previously mentioned instance between Sergio and Elena, incorporates a point-of-view shot: this immediately places the spectator into the subjective conscious of the diegetic character.

Thus the viewer sees what Sergio sees. Yet with any motion to suture the spectator, the narrative must be taken into account, as a point of view “is tied more closely to our attitude of approval or disapproval and is very different from any literal viewing angle or character’s point of view” (Browne 134). Thus the individual spectator is in place to judge Sergio’s acts as worthy or suitable of identification in the first place, judged primarily by his actions in the narrative. An event such as Sergio being accused of rape, when the viewer is aware due to the unrestricted narration that he did no such thing, a sense of empathy and hence identification is likely to follow.

Or another example, suturing the spectator into the subjective imagination, is when Sergio has fantasies about the maid Noemi. Because it is a subjective illusion the spectator is assumed to identify with it, but as previously stated, is not necessarily required to do so. Yet Sergio’s involvement with Noemi provides context to major sections of the film: because Sergio’s fantasy over her baptism is revealed to be a complete disillusionment, the spectator is forced to reconsider all the narrative sequences in the film. This is a recurrent trope through the film. The spectator is given further proof of Sergio’s bias (and hence further distanced from empathizing with him) when first only the tape-recorded fight with Laura is heard, and later the visual accompaniment. This process distances the spectator and forces criticism upon Sergio, with whom the spectator was earlier made to sub-consciously identify with: when Sergio’s actions were separated from immediate visual proof of repercussions.

Yet the spectator is not required to invoke the same level of criticism upon the documentary sequences, though they are used in several different ways. Quite explicitly the documentary segments “plac[e] Sergio in his historical context” (Burton, *Memories* 19). While seemingly a device to suture the protagonist to his historical time, the documentary footage is also performing in Brecht’s manner of rapidly changing the setting. Instead of an arrangement to quickly slide canvasses, *Memories* relies on its medium specificity and instead changes the entire diegetic world. Furthermore, the shift from documentary to footage shot for *Memories* is not always a clear one, and the spectator must objectively focus to determine which is which. In a similar vein, the flashbacks, while being subjective after being called upon by Sergio, have an apparent sparsity as a result of their jumbled temporal order.

For example, when Sergio is being driven by Pablo, he has flashbacks of them at a beach, or in a restaurant. There is no indication as to when these events happened or in what temporal order. This sequence can, for example, be seen as a flashback within a flashback, and therefore the spectator must always pay attention to decide when the present has been reinstated. The frequent shifting of time and space forces the spectator to have a fragmented identification with Sergio in order to try and process the events into a linear timeline.

Not only does this temporal shifting, which crosses the boundaries of documentary and narrative, jar the spectator by removing Sergio’s sub-conscious link (when he’s present), but it changes the thinking process needed for the sequence: “instead of sharing an experience the spectator must

come to grips with things” (Brecht 23). For example, the documentary sequence of “Fidel’s speech reaffirming Cuba’s autonomy and resistance in the face of Kennedy’s nuclear innuendoes” (Burton, *Memories* 19) effectively removes any direct criticism on the character of Sergio: for he is not really there. Thereby the spectator must no longer judge Sergio, but must analyze what Castro is saying and its repercussions. Furthermore, because all the documented events belong to the historical past (at the time of the film’s exhibition) the viewer must reason as to how the events shown from the past have affected the then-present nation of Cuba. Sergio in context to documentary footage is merely a trope: a way to connect the spectator to historical events in a way that is not too abstract or instructional. He nevertheless is the protagonist in the film, and actors have a role within the theatre of Brecht.

The Chinese acting method likened by Brecht, in which the actors freely speak to the audience and ignore a fourth wall, is not possible within the specificities of the cinema. For “[i]n the theatre, actors and spectators are present at the same time and in the same location . . . but in the cinema, the actor was present when the spectator was not (=shooting), and the spectator is present when the actor is no longer (=projection)” (Metz 704). Nevertheless the distancing effect at the hands of the actor can still be achieved. The “[distancing] efforts in question were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play” (Brecht 91). The acting performance of Sergio cannot speak or interact directly with the audience, yet nevertheless the spectator becomes increasingly distanced from his consciousness.

The voice-over is used throughout the entirety of the film. It is almost always Sergio, and while it is internal and therefore a direct link to his sub-conscious, the spectator cannot merely accept what he is saying. The images begin to run counter-point to Sergio’s narration, such as when he reflects on the class difference between himself and Elena’s family: the spectator, distanced because of fading empathy (disagreement with Sergio’s treatment of Elena, for example, attributes to this) is in a better position to ‘reason’ and determine that Sergio cannot be identified with (at least wholly, he has moments as previously mentioned) than if *Memories* was a commercial or art film entirely. Sergio’s voice-over, because it speaks over slideshows, third cinema, and documentary, further removes him from the diegesis. There are also moments of self-reflexivity in the film.

In one instance, Sergio talks with a friend at ICAIC and it is Alea himself. Alea shows Sergio a series of images from films banned during the Batista reign. He says they will be ‘used for a collage of sorts’, and the collage he speaks of is undoubtedly *Memories* itself. Therefore the diegetic content is further distanced because the spectator is now reminded that they are in a movie theatre; Alea has spoken to the audience through the cinematographic medium.

The goal of *Memories* is to both encourage spectatorial identification with Sergio, and also to destroy it with adapted Brechtian methods. The effects may be somewhat distant from Brecht’s but the goal is the same: to draw the spectator out of a ‘trance’ imposed by the narrative in order to create a distancing effect, whereby the spectator will be in a better, more objective, viewpoint to analyze and criticize Sergio’s actions. Yet because of the film’s intercut documentary sequences the spectator must also criticize the recent-past and its then-current after-effects. Both Sergio and the Cuban government openly invite criticism upon themselves and the spectator must come to terms with having identified

with a self-declared bourgeois elitist. The spectator hopes to not see too much of Sergio within him/herself.

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