

BETWEEN DISPLACEMENT AND NOSTALGIA: CONFLICTED MEMORIES OF CUBA

OCTOBER 23, 2010 | 6:00 PM

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BETWEEN DISPLACEMENT AND NOSTALGIA: CONFLICTED MEMORIES OF CUBA

Saturday, October 23 | 6:00 pm

Jack H. Skirball Series

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea: *Memorias del subdesarrollo (Memories of Underdevelopment)*, Cuba, 1968, 97 min., 35mm.

Followed by a discussion with **Cuban novelist Edmundo Desnoes**. And by Miguel Coyula: *Memorias del desarrollo (Memories of Overdevelopment)*, USA/Cuba, 2010, 113 min., digital tape

One of the first international successes of Third Cinema, **Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's** classic film was banned in the United States for five years, a victim of the embargo on post-revolutionary Cuba. *Memories of Underdevelopment* imaginatively transposes Edmundo Desnoes' eponymous stream-of-consciousness novel into a modernist cinematic space. Desnoes' ambivalence toward the new regime grew, and in 1979 he defected to the United States, where he wrote *Memories of Overdevelopment*, a companion piece to his earlier work. His writings in turn inspired young Cuban filmmaker **Miguel Coyula**, who uses the digital-media tools of his generation to comment on the issues that have fascinated Desnoes: the hunger to embrace a revolutionary cause versus political disillusionment, feeling displaced in one's own country and in permanent exile in the country of one's choice, the protracted conflict between underdevelopment and overdevelopment, and, last but not least, acerbic sexual politics. Desnoes will share his point of view on both films, creating a dialogue between Gutiérrez Alea's masterpiece and Coyula's multi-layered visual experiment.

In person: Edmundo Desnoes and Miguel Coyula

"Memories of Underdevelopment: this transfixing movie, with its mix of freewheeling dialogue scenes, still photo images and documentary footage, conjures up the uncertain mood of Havana just after the revolution. The effect is fascinating. A must-see." – *The Guardian*

"Thoughtful and cinematically bold... Memories of Overdevelopment is an affecting portrait of modern man becoming more and more isolated from a world he helped create."

– *The Hollywood Reporter*

Memories of Overdevelopment... graphically delivers and sums up both the sham of capitalism and the time warp that the Cuban Revolution has created in that island - cut off from the world, much like Sergio is... Joy is meant for fools which, as this film seems to indicate, includes most of us." – www.artsandopinion.com/

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Edmundo Desnoes was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1930 of a Spanish-speaking father and an English-speaking mother. He was educated in Cuba and the United States and studied journalism at Columbia University. In 1957 he began working in New York for the Latin American magazine *Visión*. In 1961 he returned to Cuba where he became active in the revolution. In 1962 he published his first novel, *No hay problema*, followed by *El cataclismo*. In 1964 he completed *Memorias del subdesarrollo*. The book was rejected in socialist countries, but published in England, Italy, Sweden, Japan and the US. In Cuba, Desnoes collaborated with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea on the filmic version of the novel, which became an instant classic.

Desnoes played a major role in the Cuban cultural arena; he worked in publishing for the Ministry of Education, headed the graphics department of La Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria, and taught at the School of Industrial Design. He defected in 1979 while visiting the Venice Biennale. He came to the United States the following year and has since taught at Dartmouth, Stanford, the Five Colleges, New York University and the Parsons School of Design. In 1981, he co-authored *Los dispositivos en la flor*, the first anthology of Cuban literature which included writers from the island and the diaspora.

After twenty years in exile he was invited back by various Cuban cultural organizations and, in 2003, *Memorias* was republished in Cuba. "I've been received as a prodigal son," he says, "although I have squandered my inheritance abroad whoring and enjoying a good roquefort." In 2007, he published *Memorias del desarrollo*, which completes the diptych of his life in fiction. The original narrator of the first novel now exposes and explores his life in exile. Desnoes sees himself "as a bridge over troubled waters."

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (AKA Titón, December 11, 1928 – April 16, 1996) wrote and directed more than 20 features, documentaries, and short films. Born into an affluent, politically progressive family, he received a law degree from the University of Havana, and then studied at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, where he and his future Cuban colleague Julio García Espinosa – who was to write the influential 1969 essay "For an Imperfect Cinema" – were exposed to Italian neo-realism. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, he, Espinosa and other young filmmakers founded a film collective, the Instituto Cubano del Arte y la Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC). Part of the movement that was later to be defined as "Third Cinema," "Cinema Libre" or, to follow Espinosa's formula, "Imperfect Cinema," ICAIC first focused on documentaries, but Gutiérrez Alea directed the Instituto's first feature film, *Historias de la Revolución* (*Stories Of The Revolution*, 1960), followed by *Doce sillas* (*Twelve Chairs*, (1962).

In addition to his best-known work, *Memories of Underdevelopment* (the first Cuban film to be distributed in the US), Tomás Gutiérrez Alea directed some of the most important films in the history of his country – *Muerte de un burócrata* (*Death of a Bureaucrat*, 1966), *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* (*Cuban Fight Against Demons*, 1971), *La última cena* (*The Last Supper*, 1976), *Up to a Certain Point* (*Hasta cierto punto*, 1983). Combining his filmmaking activities with his work at the ICAIC, he continued to present a complex, sometimes critical picture of Cuban society and history. His penultimate and 23rd film, *Fresa y Chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*, 1993 – co-directed with Juan Carlos Tabío) tackles the situation of homosexuals in socialist Cuba.

Miguel Coyula was born in Havana in 1977. A 1999 graduate of the International Film and Television School de Los Baños, Cuba, he completed several award-winning short films, such as *Dancing on Needles* (1999), *Nice Going* (1999), *Clase Z Tropical* (2000) and *Plastic Fork* (2001). Invited to show one of his films in the US, he was offered an acting scholarship to attend the Strasberg Institute. He then directed his first digital feature, *Red Cockroaches* (2003), which became an underground cult movie, and was noted for his imaginative use of inexpensive digital technology: the film was shot for \$2,000. Awarded a John Simon Guggenheim scholarship, Coyula then teamed with New York independent producer David W. Leitner and worked for about five years to complete *Memorias del desarrollo*. The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2010, and is currently being shown in various festivals in the US and Latin America.

Coyula is currently in pre-production on a new feature, *New Road* – the second part of a trilogy started with *Red Cockroaches*.

Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud.

Funded in part with generous support from Wendy Keys and Donald Pels.

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November 22: Thom Andersen: Out of the Car and into the Music of the Street

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