The development of cinema, from seemingly the moment of its invention, expanded in two disparate paths: one is the tradition of Georges Méliès (A Trip to the Moon), a magician, who favored this new medium as an extension of spectacle for entertainment’s sake; the other, in the tradition of the Lumière brothers (their near-immediate encroachment upon Latin America as a commercial market not withstanding), as a medium via which social reality may be captured, as in the newsreel and the documentary. The heritage of Hollywood is clearly in the vein of the former. Rare has been the film produced in Hollywood, if ever, with the singular intention to not merely “hold a mirror up to nature,” as Hamlet would say, but to affect society in the process, to advance complete social revolution. Reasons for why this may be the case are myriad, but Latin America has, at least since the 1960s, taken the latter route with a vengeance. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, director of Memories of Underdevelopment (Cuba, 1968), in 1988, recalls the explosive events of that time as being “almost sufficient just to record, to capture directly some fragment of reality, and simply reflect the goings-on in the streets” (“The Viewer’s Dialect”). Alea employs documentary style footage frequently in Memories of Underdevelopment, but suggests that the documentary approach, however, is “no longer sufficient,” given the fact that as time has passed, “images of the Revolution have become ordinary, familiar” (“The Viewer’s Dialect”). The apparent
fact that jadedness is a phenomenon of modernity is problematic to the filmmaker and the revolutionary. Nothing will change if no one is moved to change. Nevertheless, film once had the power to not only reflect social change but to incite it.

It would take more than sixty years for the archival possibilities of cinema to evolve into the weapon of revolution that it became in Latin America as a revolt against the oppressive values and economic theories of Europe and the United States. While not precisely “third cinema,” an expression more accurately denoting an Argentine movement in the late 1960s, Cuba’s *Memories of Underdevelopment* is certainly “revolutionary,” though not in a manner many North Americans recognized, so subtle are its techniques. Perhaps because *Memories of Underdevelopment* avoids all the expected Marxist clichés associated with, say, Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*, images of struggling peasants in the countryside (the film is uniquely urban in its imagery), or raised fists together breaking their chains, the typical citizen, upon viewing the film when it was released in the United States in 1974, according to Alea “misinterpreted [it] as a critique of the revolution” having missed the “creative approach to the representation of subjectivity” (Aufderheide). In fact, the film is highly critical of European and North American cultural influences, but failed interpretations is the risk of subjectivity, the film’s primary mode of expression, following the approach of the novel *Inconsolable Memories*, by Edmundo Desnoes, upon which it is based, though with contrasting, “objective” elements not present in the novel, such as documentary footage of the actual revolution in progress. This blending of the subjective narrator in traditional 1st cinema style and the objective viewer of 3rd cinema is precisely what propels the film and produces its revolutionary effect.
Moving beyond Jean-Luc Godard’s anti-bourgeois cinema, Alea argues that “popular cinema should aim to transform reality and better humankind, [and] to be fully developed, it must coincide with the (same) interests of the state: hence, it can only exist under socialism.” It could be argued that Alea is indeed an auteur, that the imprimatur of his psyche and ideology are eminently imposed upon the film. His European training is clearly evident in the film’s narrative structure of memory via flashbacks and in the technical proficiency on display. Nevertheless, the larger goal of dramatizing the film’s ostensible protagonist is to draw the viewer into the mind of an anti-hero and explode his failed cultural ideology. Alea’s approach to puncture and criticize the spectator is clear in the representation of Sergio (Sergio Corrieri) whom Alea argues “is not someone to imitate—he lacks a series of obvious virtues—but he is contradictory” (Aufderheide). Sergio is not without his charms. He dresses well, appreciates fine art, admires education, etc. These “qualities,” however, are soon demonstrated to be precisely his tragic flaw. He is not conscious of reality. He has accepted in a mindless, conformist manner the dictates of culture from elsewhere, rendering him incapable of participating in a larger reality, the reality of class struggle. Sergio is a representation of what is wrong with the world; he is an exemplar of false consciousness, as are many spectators. His function is to compel self-criticism in the spectator, to encourage recognition of the inherent disingenuousness of such a person.

Alea further argues that film not only “entertains and informs, it also shapes taste, intellectual judgment and states of consciousness” and that a filmmaker’s responsibility is to encourage spectators to stop being mere spectators and to “encounter that other reality, their social and individual life” (“The Viewer’s Dialectic” 110). In other words, the
function of film is to further the revolution, to “elevate the viewer’s revolutionary consciousness and to arm them for the ideological struggle which they have to wage against all kinds of reactionary tendencies, and it should also contribute to their enjoyment of life” (“The Viewer’s Dialectic” 110). In these and myriad other ways, *Memories of Underdevelopment* fulfills the designation “revolutionary.”

While memory is a significant narrative element in the understanding of Sergio’s past and his failure to recognize the real world around him, the second expression of the title, *underdevelopment*, begs the question, “what exactly is ‘underdeveloped?’” On the narrative level, the word signifies the petit-bourgeois protagonist’s existential trauma as he grapples unsuccessfully with the massive changes in society occurring all around him in his country. We may see him—certainly he is coded European—as akin to Mersault in *The Stranger*, trapped in an adolescent’s futile attempt to find rational order where none exists, capable only of directing his attention to matters that center on his own body, on his physical relationships with women, on passively observing but never attaining the agency of an adult, an active participant in the world. Certainly, Sergio, like Mersault, is alienated from the world around him, complaining that “Everything happens to me too early or too late.” He is not capable of committing to this world, and neither does he find meaning in it. He is isolated from the revolution, content to merely observe the world, either peering through his telescope out the window of his fine, comfortable apartment where he continues to live as a rent-collecting property owner at the city below and upon others in the actual process of living, even upon the eve of the missile crisis. Like Mersault, Sergio finds himself in trouble with the law, having been accused of raping a young girl. He tells the truth, and the court finds him not guilty, perhaps a shot across the
bow to the United States’ government that presumed a socialist court could not possibly result in justice. Sergio is guilty, however, of using people, particularly women, not as ends unto themselves, as Kant would have us, but as a means to his own end. More important, he does not participate in the ongoing struggle to improve the lot of the people. Sergio remains in Cuba through the “exodus of the traitors and timorous ones, the henchmen’s trials” ostensibly to observe…the daily radicalization…the armed confrontations, the sabotages, the counterrevolution in the Escambray mountains, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the October Missile crisis” merely because he wants to see what will happen (“The Viewer’s Dialectic” 108). Like Mersault, he is not a participant in society; he is merely a spectator, and he is critical of everything and everyone around him. Sergio criticizes Elena because she “didn’t think as much as [he] did.” While he tries to live as a European, she “makes [him] feel the underdevelopment [of Cuba] at every step.” Thinking is, of course, a passive activity. Action is the sign of a developed person. Of his former wife, he remarks: “I see you struggle between elegance and vulgarity. All these products (clothes, makeup) keep you from being a slovenly Cuban girl.” It is Elena, however, the young, uneducated Cuban girl who perceives his character most acutely: “Nada, tu eres nada—nothing, you’re nothing.” This dialogue may hearken to Castro’s own dictum: “Within the revolution, everything; against it, nothing” (Aufderheide). In explaining “imperfect cinema,” Julio Garcia Espinoza maintains that imperfect cinema must above all show the process which generates the problems” (“For an Imperfect Cinema”). The process of Sergio’s alienation is juxtaposed against the archival footage of the revolution, resulting in an unsettling loss of spectator equilibrium, no doubt precisely Alea’s goal in demonstrating the process which resulted in his
[Sergio’s] alienation. It is difficult to ascertain whether Sergio will, like Meursault, continue to avoid placing any meaning in the idea of human existence. The final image of atomic disaster is, however, a clear warning to wake up, because as Sergio observes, “This island is a trap. We’re very small and too poor. It’s an expensive dignity.” Alas, he is likely unaware of the irony of his comment.
Works Cited


