Blurring the Other in Memories of Underdevelopment and Pixote: The Law of the Weakest

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Abstract

The paper analyzes two films – Memories of Underdevelopment by Tomas Gutiérrez Alea and Hector Babenco’s Pixote: The Law of the Weakest – by looking at the respective protagonists in the perspective of the term blurred other. The term implies that the protagonists are ambiguous characters embodying both the principles of the Other/Alien and that of the transgressed identity of the First. Memories are looked at through the dialectic of contrasting visual and textual narration, involving the subversive offer for the spectator to choose the ideological side. Pixote is analyzed through a deconstruction of the binary oppositions of decadence and order and through an analysis of the duality present in the main character’s identity features: the abolishment of childhood traits and the assuming of the others’ identity by emulating them as role models and becoming corrupt in the process. Both films were milestones in their native countries, Memories being a seminal example of subversion in Cuban socialist cinema and Pixote being an almost real-life representation of the Brazilian social and political disorder in the last quarter of the 20th century. The paper also emphasizes the subversion as regards the context of the novels on which the film were based: departing from Desnoes’ utopian melancholy in the case of Memories and from Louzeiro’s reportagem prose in the case of Pixote.

Keywords: Other, blurred, ideology, decadency, delinquent, Subject.

The aim of this paper is to establish the presence and importance of the postmodern Other in Tomas Gutiérrez Alea’s film Memories of Underdevelopment (Memorias del Subdesarrollo, 1968) and in Hector Babenco’s Pixote: The Law of the Weakest (Pixote: a Lei do Mais Fraco, 1980), the former being the milestone of Cuban socialist cinema after the Revolution and the latter a prime example of Brazilian naturalistic New wave cinema (Nagib 2007). The analysis will reveal that this Other is not apparent in the subversions of the narratives and visual structure of either film. The introduction of the term blurring with respect to the represented/subverted ideological perspective serves to highlight this impasse and render it operative. While the Other operates on the level of binary oppositions, the Blurred Other operates on both sides of these poles, making its position by accepting the notions of both antagonistic ideologies (socialism/capitalism, social order/disorder etc.)
Being as diverse as the area itself, Latin American modern and avant-garde cinema, is suitable for study under the aegis of various different and opposing postmodern and cultural-studies theories. The recent work of Lucia Nagib on new Brazilian cinema - *Brazil on Screen, 2007* - is most useful in this respect, as she traces the kernel of postmodernism in the avant-garde oeuvre of Glauber Rocha. Historically the region has produced such diverse movements as *Imperfect Cinema, Cinema Novo* or *Third Cinema*, as well as theorists and filmmakers ranging from the political activist Glauber Rocha or neo-Marxist Tomas Gutiérrez Alea to the *peronista* Fernando Solanas. It would seem that an early postmodern attitude was already common to many visual and literary artist of the region inclined towards film as a means of social and cultural catharsis even before it became the omnipresent Western paradigm.

The situation of diverse ideologies and of a dialogue/conflict between these was well established in Latin America (due to the *casta* system in social and economic terms), and through moving pictures it became a charged kernel of the cultural/social landscape witnessed earlier in the works of *Pintura Indigena Peruana* - *Peruvian Indigenous Painting*. It was this group of Peruvian artists that made the first radical *blurring* of the Other in the famous paintings of Jose Sabogal, Julia Codesido and Cotta Carvalho. Sabogal juxtaposed indigenous subjects (mainly Aymara and Quechua *campesinos* - peasants) with an iconography reserved for the white elite. This represented the indigenous not as the clear Other/Alien in the context of high art but as the Other with no clear ideological conflict, since the Peruvian Constitution and legislation had made them full citizens. Similarly Carvalho and Codesido, the first two Peruvian feminist artist, juxtaposed indigenous women and their archetypal iconography with emblems of elite art - posing them as so many Venuses and Mayas. However, political turmoil and change in the prevailing ideology closed the chapter not only on *Pintura Indigena Peruana* but also on Mexican Marxist *muralists* and on Brazilian *Cinema Novo*.

Often the radical and bloody military junta coups made it impossible to predict the next step in the development of artistic or political life. Since almost every country in the region went from censorship, guerrilla warfare, and dictatorship to democracy and pluralism - all of these factors influenced cinema profoundly, since together with theatre film was/is foremost social or socially driven art. Inevitably, this led many notable artist into immigration (Raul Ruiz and Miguel Littin from Chile, Glauber Rocha, to name only a few), while others opted for change in their aesthetics, excluding the political and social impact of their work (Ruy Guerra, Nelson Pereira dos Santos).

Nevertheless, even under the harsh conditions of censorship and brutal political terror some filmmakers managed to produce films, which defied the straight and narrow viewpoint of the leading ideology by outsmarting it through innovative and complex usage of subject positions, identity features, and representation skills. This paper focuses on two films and two directors who achieved that, as it tries to identify models and concepts behind the achievement of their seminal works: *Memories of Underdevelopment* by Gutierrez Alea and *Pixote: A Law of the Weakest* by Babenco. The analysis will show that however distant in their social or aesthetic appearance, these films share the same essential means of *blurring* and awkwardly representing the filmic Subject, the ideological or social features,
while still being accessible to wider audiences.

The question of the Other and alterity has deep roots in the history and tradition of Latin America. First or Principal was the ideology culturally and politically dominant for centuries (colonial casta systems and de-colonial class segregation) inherent as it is in the colonial system or prevailing political power, whilst the Other presented a necessary alterity imposed by the First in order to maintain the traditional duality of culture or politics. This notion has always been repeated in the works of Frantz Fanon, Octavio Getino, Jose Mariategui and Glauber Rocha. This underlined the subversive potential of the Oppressed (Other) by his ability to learn the language and tools of the Oppressor, thus becoming aware of the ideological power of violence and corruption. In the doctrine of decolonization the false caste/class liberation began to change with the arrival of socialistic and Marxist thought, which in turn changed the basic relation that obtains between of the First and its Other - and thus ideology became a prevailing factor in the aesthetic representation.

Memories of Underdevelopment

A great example of the foregoing can be found in Memories of Underdevelopment from 1968, directed by Cuban Tomas Gutierrez Alea in which “pre-Revolutionary world is dismembered while the cultural shapes of the new have not yet emerged” (Chanan 2004, 289). Correctly described by Michael Chanan as the film about an intellectual anti-hero Sergio Carmona in the state of paralyzed perceptiveness, Memories is an exceptional example of fragmentation and dissociation of imagery and representation (Hart 2004, 52). Living under newly formed socialism, the bourgeois Sergio is at first glance a classical cinematic Subject fortified by his role of the Narrator throughout the film, but it is all an uncanny deception since as a bourgeois relict he cannot cope with the Real that has emerged with the Revolution.

The opening shots of the film depict a street carnival with conga drums and mambo dancers filmed with handheld camera in a quick succession of jump-cuts. The camera then turns to Sergio’s farewell with his wife, who leaves for the USA, after which voice-over narration begins and frame becomes a frame of a voyeur looking through binoculars at close-ups of failed capitalism in Cuba: skyscrapers, industrial facilities, abandoned projects, Picasso’s missing picture of the dove he was supposed to send etc. The visual imagery is juxtaposed with textual meaning of the narration and narration itself underlines the basic problem of Sergio’s blurred otherness.

Sergio: “Nothing has changed here, at first it looks like a cardboard city. Abandoned imperial eagle, and where is the dove that Picasso was supposed to send? It is easy to be a communist millionaire in Paris... But everything seems so different today. Is it I who has changed or the city?” (Desnoes 1971, 16)

Alea offers the spectator the choice of going along with the Narrator (through textual context) or choosing visual framing that contradicts the Narrator’s perspective. It is a stylistic and directorial procedure evident throughout the film and it is precisely that choice of the spectator that can be considered subversive. This is evident in seminal sequences of shots that began with a binocular frame that transposes into contrasted shot in which Sergio takes the dying canary from
the birdcage and throws it without remorse from his balcony. The symbolism of this shot is clear after watching the film: it is Sergio who is dying like the canary, being unable to fight the inevitable – the ideological change and its consequences. Both sequences overlap with taped narration on the topic of decadency (the filthy city, the rotten streets, the change of ideology).

Somewhat similar in his unbiased nature to Hector Babenco’s antihero in *Pixote*, Alea’s character is decisively different from the literary Malabre of Edmundo Desnoes’ novel on which the film is based, in the sense that he does not find purpose in anything, whereas Desnoes depicts his protagonist Malabre/Sergio as a victim of ideologies. He operates in what is to him a nightmarish reality that doesn’t offer anything outside the casual sexual/intellectual encounters with Pablo (his only friend) and Elena (a mulatta who he is attracted to even as he despises her lack of sophistication). Alea maybe felt the need to ascribe to Sergio some obvious Western-European narrowness through political and social decay (hence the Picasso’s dove remark) but he also blurred the nature of his (anti)hero so as to leave open some sympathy for the dying quasi-intellectual elite in Cuba (hence Picasso the communist in the Paris remark). Both of these notions are left for the audience to decide upon, and therein lies the subversive mirroring in Alea’s film.

This blurring works in two opposite directions in many important Latin American films but it can be a paradigmatic tool for an auteur filmmaker trying to keep his distance from the government-driven ideology. In *Memorias* the blurring mainly has as its goal to conceal the true nature of the Other; it is apparent that it is precisely Sergio himself who becomes the Other, while all law-abiding Cubans become the First, having been the Other before the ideological breach. We cannot guess Sergio’s real emotions and attitudes, since they are all blurred by his heavy critique of politics and culture and unwillingness to make a decision, which evolve from his alteration/Otherness. The titular topic of underdevelopment works cuts both ways in this context: while Sergio refuses the new reality, he in turn becomes underdeveloped himself (by refusing immigration to the USA and by refusing to hail the socialistic ideology); the Others (from his perspective), who started at an underdeveloped level will eventually become developed (Xavier 1999, 335). Since Alea hides the true nature of his own views on the subject, through the blurring of Sergio’s identity we can grasp very little: this enables the filmmaker’s elusive avoidance of the actual truth, which he leaves to the perceptiveness of the audience. That this dialectical approach was after all a necessity for the auteurs who wanted to work in their native countries is evident in Glauber Rocha’s *Antonio das Mortes* and in Humberto Solas’ *Lucia*. The issues of identity in representation appear every time when the dominant ideology uses the cinema as a political and social tool to bolster its authority even further; directors such as Alea managed to avoid the ideology draft by using a structured multi-layered presentation of the main character, thus subverting his identity in every respect.

To go back to the case of Sergio in *Memorias*, we must also note the ideological issues addressed in the film. Sergio as an anti-hero stands out at first as a self-willed individual who refuses to be subjected to the new interpellation process of the socialist thought in which: “ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects by the functioning of the category of the subject”
Inevitably, with this process over, Sergio would become obsolete, a redundancy. Looking further through Althusser’s optics, we could be asking is there any way to avoid this interpellation, and in a cinematic sense, the answer would be: possibly through representation. Alea managed this by focusing on the main character who manages, through his soliloquy and apolitical narratives, to distance himself from the dominant ideology. Furthermore, Alea constructs the kind of play upon the issue of identity and captures elusive aspects of the identity crisis of the individual within the revolutionary process introducing the issues of desgarramiento – the ideological rupture with the past (M. Chanan 295).

Typically, a postmodern subject evoked through crisis reveals that blurring the cinematic Other is an apparent sanctuary for the author himself. Alea left his hero inevitably “in the void or in the hole of the other” to borrow from Žižek’s assessment of ideological failure; but on the other hand, Sergio is a former ideological reptile and he always is the Other because of his unwillingness to hail the new reality. He would be regarded as a foreigner at an unfathomable remove from society (Žižek, 1989, 178). Later, Alea would refine the basic ideological context of his country’s future in 1993’s Strawberries and Chocolate – a curious study in the confines of ideology, where he transposed the struggle of the individual onto a level of national bipolarity of social and political orientations. The victorious ideology that emerges from the fringes of the Other is also a crucial context in Humberto Solas Lucia (1968), in which three stories from the Cuban past are juxtaposed in order to emphasize the true nature of the ideology of colonialism and decolonialization (Kovacks 1975, 34). As in Alea’s film, the commutation between the order of the Other and of ideology is a key issue, becoming a veritable trademark of Cuban post-revolutionary cinema.

**Pixote: the Law of the Weakest**

Babenco’s film is interesting from various theoretical perspectives (Marxist, postcolonial subaltern), but unlike Memories it is a product of the documentary style of Brazilian cinéma vérité that emerged on the ruins of Cinema Novo in the late 1970s. The link between the two films can be found on the level of their radical reinterpretation of the novels they were based upon. Alea transformed Desnoes’ Malabre into a dialectical subject and Babenco will do the same with Pixote. The novel Childhood of the Dead (Infancia dos mortos) written by Jose Louzeiro is a reportagem prose depicting, an overtly naturalistic portrayal of the notorious incident knows as Camanducia Case, in which adolescent delinquents from the youth penitentiary in Minas Gerais were thrown off the cliffs and killed, allegedly because of with mutiny inside the prison walls (Johnson 1987, 35-47). Unlike Louzeiro’s novel in which Pixote is a supporting character who dies in the middle of the plot, Babenco’s Pixote becomes the protagonist and an adolescent (anti)hero who incorporates the features of several characters from the novel.

Precisely this repositioning of the Pixote character and the elaboration of his ambiguous representation is the quality – both aesthetic and theoretical – responsible for the visual material due to which Babenco’s film is often regarded as one of the most disturbing and uncanny in the cinema (a dead fetus in a dirty toilette, child prostitution, child abuse etc.). Pixote is constructed as a two part documentary drama, with the first part taking place inside the repressive
institutions of a youth prison, where the psychological and character features of the whole ensemble are being uncovered: corrupt guards, immoral parents, abandoned children, traumatized homosexuals, drug abuse and sodomy among delinquents. The second part reveals the story of the false liberation of the escaped prisoners on the streets and in favelas. The didactic impetus is obvious in the film’s prologue, where Babenco reminds the spectator of the decadency of Brazilian society ripped apart by delinquency, poverty, and famine throughout Brazil. It is important to note that main characters are played by real-life delinquents: Fernando Ramos da Silva, who plays Pixote, will be killed in a police ambush a few years after the film’s premiere (Levine 1997, 202).

The panorama of characters who populate the plot of Pixote is marked by evident transgression of their identities: Pixote is an abandoned child of 13, exhibiting strong tendencies to learn by emulation of role models and conforming to the collective: he inevitably loses his childhood identification with every sequence. Fumaça is a cannabis addict and a child of a mentally-ill mother and will become a junkie; Lilica is a transvestite with a single goal: to get a gender reassignment surgery; Garatão is his/her lover, depicted as a macho leader who hides his gay emotional persona; Dito is a sporting type, who has a promiscuous mother, who is prostitutes herself for the prison headmaster Sapato; Roberto is a gay singer that wants to become a rock-star. All of the delinquents eventually die and Pixote assumes most of their identity traits by becoming a pimp, a junkie, and a killer while remaining emotionally empty. Babenco amplifies this ambiguous subjectivity within Pixote in order to mark him as the Other, an alien in every context, but also by identifying the assumed features with ethical principles that were abolished in the process of transgression. This postulates the blurred otherness of Pixote.

Female characters are all negatively portrayed and shown as the corruptive agencies of the society; Dito’s mother is a prostitute, Deborah is an escort and a junkie taking advantage of the delinquent adolescents, Sueli is a prostitute seeking a sponsor who will save her from the favela: her violent abortion, followed by a close-up of the dead fetus thrown into a toilette, is an uncanny highlight of the visual and contextual mastery that Babenco achieves. The negativity of the female characters is not the misogyny for which Eisentein and Buñuel were criticized by feminist theorist like Salazkina and Bulgakowa, but a real-life depiction of the horrors of the lower social strata in Minas Gerais at the time. This point links the film with the abertura cultural movement in Brazil in mid-1970s, which was an aesthetic and agitation revolt against the 20 years of dictatorships and juntas (Shaw 2003). Abertura literally means liberation but in the cinematic context it means open advocacy of naturalistic and explicit representation of the censored, taboo topics such as incest, adolescent pornography, violence, and political corruption. João Luiz Vieira – the leading Brazilian theoretician of the postmodern, sums up Babenco’s abertura: “Naturalism becomes a part of the seductive strategy of associating cinema spectacle with authenticity and even with audacity of representing raw contents of everyday life” (Johnson, Stam 1995, 412).

The connection between Pixote and the blurred other lies in the strategies of representation of his identity through cinematic a procédé constructed as a multilayered mirroring of the protagonist’s desires: when Pixote wants comfort he
embraces Dito, when he wants joy, he embraces Lilica and Roberto, when he searches for contemplation, he smokes with Fumaça. There is no clear identity mark peculiar to Pixote, apart from his being a 13-year-old abandoned delinquent; all of his characteristics were assumed through emulation of role models: Pixote watches a violent action film with his buddies and in the next shot is seen molesting an even weaker adolescent. Pixote’s otherness lies in his childish features, such as the fear of authority figure, playfulness, and the need for the mother figure. In a society where an abnormal and decadent adolescent is seen as normal, the need of the child is coded as alien and condemned to fail. Pixote’s assumed reshaping of his persona becomes blurred when we compare his childish features with the features of a delinquent adult (murder, prostitution, drug trafficking). He is not a completely corrupt agency of horror, but at the same time he’s not completely innocent either. His duality of the blurred other is best witnessed in the closing shots of the film.

The sequence begins with a medium shot of Sueli and Pixote lying on a bed and watching the variety show on television. Pixote becomes Sueli’s pimp after Dito’s death in the previous sequence: it is hw who brings the news to the desolate Sueli. Pixote throws up in the middle of the scene and Sueli pulls him onto her breasts and tries to comfort him.

Sueli: “Everything is all right now, Sueli is here, it will pass!”

Camera zooms into close-up of Pixote beginning to suck her breast as an infant, while Sueli keeps comforting him.

Sueli: “Suck it baby, suck it, mommy is with you” (Babenco, *Pixote* 1980, DVD)

Pixote begins to breastfeed even harder and Sueli pushes him off quite abruptly and Pixote starts to cry and leaves her and the apartment for good and after checking his gun disappears in the distance of the *favela*. We can assume that he walks towards his certain death. The symbolism of the sequence is multiple: at first, after Dito’s death Pixote desires to become Sueli’s lover and pushes for the intercourse but throws up in the process; memories of Dito and the committed homicide woke up the child side of his character full of fear and the need for mother’s comfort, so he takes the offered breast as a substitute for all the horrors of his adolescence. The final breach results from Sueli’s resistance towards motherhood, as she needs Pixote as a pimp and protector, not as a child in need. Pixote leaves after all of his child features are destroyed and his only credo becomes a loaded gun – a symbol of learned/assumed violence which as a corrupting agency has transformed him from the adolescent into an uncanny junkie/pimp/killer.

**Memories and Pixote**

Finally we can note the similarity of the two subjects in these films; Sergio being rendered obsolete by the change of ideology, Pixote being made obsolete by the decadent society which treats children like criminals. While Sergio abandons his sexual and voyeur habits, Pixote learns along the way how to become a corrupt adult/child: it all leads in the same direction, they are both aliens of the society, the Others of the ideology, since they cannot choose which order to hail and which to negate. There is a scene in *Memories* that sums up the issue of
indecisiveness inherent in their Otherness. The scene begins with a long shot of Sergio in a bedroom, slowly beginning a transvestite séance by putting on his wife’s clothes, panties, lipstick and finally ending up with a nylon sock on his head. During the shot, overlapped by a voice-over narration of a quarrel between Sergio and his wife, Sergio paints a female face with the lipstick on the mirror, so as to amplify his yearning for a female body. His emotions run from playfulness in the beginning to an absolute numbness at the end. This is also apparent in Pixote, who at first gets thrilled with the life of an adolescent gangster but slowly his playfulness evolves into an emotional numbness and a loss of ethical principles.

Wherein, then, lies the seminal importance of the blurred other, when the subjects are all washed up and spat out by the wheel of ideology? It lies precisely in the spectator’s attitude towards the represented subjectivity. If we understand Sergio as a relic of the ancient regime, we cannot dismiss his desires and melancholy; if we understand Pixote as victim of a corrupt and uncanny society, we cannot dismiss his fallen attempts to be a child. This dialectic is precisely the meaning of the blurred other and its importance as the concept of subversive strategy towards the official ideology is a seminal value in both Alea’s and Babenco’s aesthetics.

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[1] *Imperfect Cinema* – a Cuban cinema movement led by Julio Garcia Espinosa, named after his manifesto *Por Un Cinema Imperfecto* from 1969, which calls for a Brechtian cinema production for the revolutionary masses; *Cinema Novo* – Brazilian avant-garde movement led by Glauber Rocha, theorized in his manifesto *Ezstetyka do fame* from 1965, which calls for a violent cultural revolution against Western imperialism; *Third Cinema* – Argentine movement based on the manifesto *Hacia un Tercer Cine* written by Octavio Getino and visualized through *Grupo Cine Liberacion* led by Getino and Fernando Solanas.


[3] A comparison of Augusto Boal’s *Thetare of the Opressed in Brazil* and Bolivian *Ukamuau Grupo* reveal that both activist theatre and activist cinema began to revolutionize the masses of oppressed indigenous and *casta* (mixed race) communities.

[4] The term often used by performance artist Allan Kaprow and art historian Edward Lucie-Smith to emphasize the fluctuating links between the media in which there is no hierarchy between theatre, performance, painting, music or text. Likewise, there is no hierarchy of the facets of Sergio’s multiple identities: we cannot say that he is a leftist or a capitalist; we cannot say that he is truly a *macho* or a true apolitical snob.

[5] *Antonio das mortes* is a last final film in Rocha’s *sertao* trilogy, in which the character of a hired gunman Antonio das Mortes, who was *cangaco*’s nemesis in *White God, Black Devil*, makes a curious reappearance as a *cangaco* savior.

[6] Brazilian director Jose Jofilly made the film *Who Killed Pixote* (*Quem matou Pixote*) in 1996 as an homage to Ramos da Silva but also to all the delinquents from the *favela* who participated in various Brazilian films during the 1980s.

**Summary**

The paper tries to connect two seminal Latin American films through analytical usage of the term *blurring the other*. The focus of analysis is on the transgression
of the identity features of the protagonists: Sergio and Pixote. Using the dialectics and subversive nature of the relationship between visual and textual contexts, it becomes clear that both characters can be seen as the *blurred other* in a sense that they embody the duality of the ideologies they transgressed or progress towards. Presenting a clear analysis of two seminal sequences, the work emphasizes the qualities of their directors subversive avoidance of ideological drift implied by the films topic and immediate social circumstances. Both Sergio and Pixote are *blurred others* but also corrupt agencies, leftovers of the ideological breach that emerged in Cuba after the revolution and in Brazil after the dictatorships.