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'I would rather go on being underdeveloped.' Rereading and recontextualising Edmundo Desnoes's 1965 novel *Memorias del subdesarrollo*

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Source: *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, Winter 2020, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Winter 2020), pp. 329-350

Published by: Pluto Journals

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/intejcubastud.12.2.0329>

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ACADEMIC ARTICLE

'I WOULD RATHER GO ON BEING UNDERDEVELOPED.' REREADING AND RECONTEXTUALISING EDMUNDO DESNOES'S 1965 NOVEL *MEMORIAS DEL SUBDESARROLLO*

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Abstract

This article follows two lines of inquiry. First, it provides a rereading of the novel *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Desnoes 1965), suggesting that the protagonist, Sergio, is affected by the threat of nuclear war throughout the novel and that this fear dominates the text from the outset, and not just the novel's ending during the Missile Crisis of October 1962. It argues that Sergio's state of anxiety and inertia derive as much from this fear as from his intellectual detachment and problematic relationship with the Cuban Revolution, where critical attention has tended to focus. This rereading gives texture to Sergio's inaction and nihilism, revealing a coherent response of an individual to the threat of catastrophe. Secondly, this article sets this rereading against a new context of catastrophe: that of climate change, ecosystem collapse and species extinction. In this context an overlooked revolutionary fervour is detected in Sergio that provides a reading of hope in the narrative that, when read analogously against the present, may reflect a sense of hope against calamity.

Keywords: Desnoes, *Memorias*, Cuba, revolution, Missile Crisis, nuclear, catastrophe, climate change, decarbonisation

The nuclear mushroom is watching me with a smile!

Desnoes, *Memories of Underdevelopment*

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's 1968 film *Memorias del subdesarrollo* is a staple of many Latin American programmes in European and the US universities, and is indispensable for any Cuba-focused course. In over a decade teaching the film at the University of Kent, UK, I have explored with numerous groups multiple aspects of Sergio's character and his state of anxiety and *ennui*, considering him against the turbulent backdrop of Cuban history between the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961 and the Missile Crisis of October 1962, exploring the social tensions, politics, geopolitics, class, race and gender inequality, and the 'desgarramiento' (Chanan 1990: 9) of the bourgeois stumbling reluctantly towards revolutionary consciousness.

Recently, however, seminar discussions have shifted direction, and attention has turned to Sergio's sombre response to the film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and to the final scenes during the Missile Crisis. In these discussions, the element of catastrophe has been foregrounded, the specific historical drama deprioritised, Sergio's apathy and inertia perceived not only in relation to *that* time and *that* place but also to a transhistorical context of imminent disaster. The film is changing before my eyes. Sergio's trysts and ruminations are increasingly sucked, eschatologically, towards the film's dark concluding frames. Catastrophe is the ultimate motivation for his demotivation. His inertia is not only because he is trapped between the old and the new political and social orders, not only because his literary aspirations have faded, not only because he retains – and wishes to retain – his class, race and gender privilege, and not only because he is unconvinced by revolutionary rhetoric, but because he fears that all action is ultimately and imminently futile in the presence of nuclear cataclysm.

These ideas have prompted me to focus my attention on the novel upon which the film's screenplay was developed, both written by Edmundo Desnoes.¹ This is

1 The novel receives less attention than the film, which is unsurprising given the excellence of the film and its impact and influence, given Gutiérrez Alea's claims that Desnoes 'worked over his novel as if it were raw material' (Burton 1990: 188), and given Desnoes's claim that the film was richer than the novel. He even added features from the film to later editions of the novel, including in English (translated by him), published after the film's release.

because his diary entries, especially the reflections on *Hiroshima mon amour* and his response to the Missile Crisis, are more detailed than in the film and demonstrate from the beginning Sergio's state of fear and anxiety regarding nuclear war. It is also because the film is more strongly anchored than the novel in the historical context, with its inclusion of archive footage of the Bay of Pigs invasion and trials, and thus the novel floats more freely from its setting than the film and is more malleable to recontextualisation.

Why the shift in emphasis? Nothing has changed in the novel or its historical context. Something has changed in the readers' context, and this, as Borges suggested of generations of readers of any text, changes the text.² Like Sergio, human society today is living in a time of imminent catastrophe. As time progresses the tone is moving from *possibility* to *inevitability*. Though it is not as popularly feared as it was during the Cold War, it is arguable that the threat of nuclear disaster is as present today as it was in 1962 if not more so (Chomsky 2004). However, given that nuclear war is *only* a threat and not a process (i.e. it happens or it does not happen) and that nearly 60 years have passed since that particular stand-off, some sense of security, however misguided, is engendered. Our drama today is global warming, ecosystem collapse and species extinction. The crises we face are unfolding just as predicted, and in some cases – such as insect loss, methane release from warming permafrost, glacier and polar ice melt – faster and sooner (IPCC 2018). The crisis is not potential. It is happening.

And yet, on the level of subjective experience, many of us, such as myself in the green and pleasant south-east of the UK, still perceive this crisis and threat as a mediated experience. Thus while we see visions of climate change and ecological disaster, bush fires, floods, locust swarms etc. in the broadcast and social media, in our own lives the birds still sing, insects hum, trees thrive and flowers flourish. There is still a relative distance from the crisis. We therefore share with Sergio that stunned sense of incredulity: we are in an emergency yet life continues more or less as normal. Things have changed yet things remain the same. We understand the need for radical system change – the need, ultimately, for

2 'Emerson said that a library is a magic chamber in which there are many enchanted spirits. They wake when we call them. When the book lies unopened, it is literally, geometrically, a volume, a thing among things. When we open it, when the book surrenders itself to its reader, the aesthetic event occurs. And even for the same reader the same book changes, for the change; we are the river of Heraclitus, who said that the man of yesterday is not the man of today, who will not be the man of tomorrow. We change incessantly, and each reading of a book, each rereading, each memory of that rereading, reinvents the text. The text too is the changing river of Heraclitus' (Borges 1984: 61).

revolution – whilst actively, and in most cases unavoidably, participating in the established systems. Sergio's dilemma, therefore, resonates across the ages.

This article focuses on Sergio's responses to imminent catastrophe. Scrutinising the novel and paying closer attention than many critical responses have hitherto paid to Sergio's reflections on *Hiroshima mon amour*, I propose a reading of *Memorias* that foregrounds the threat of catastrophe as the critical operational force of the narrative. Working backwards from this perspective, I re-examine scenes from Sergio's narrative that suggest that his state of acute anxiety derives less from what Gutiérrez Alea describes as a reluctant political 'toma de conciencia' of the former businessman (Burton 1990: 193), and more from the underlying sense of impending destruction. This inquiry does not seek to critique or refute the 60 years of scholarly analyses of the novel, but to build upon them through exploring an overlooked yet significant element of the text.

In so doing, I query the implications of this reframing, and as such I consider Sergio against the multidisciplinary discourses termed Climate Studies. Accordingly, I propose a reading of the character Sergio and his anxiety and inaction as commensurate with what Andrews and Hoggett (2019: 157) examine as 'climate psychology . . . which attempts to offer a psycho-social perspective between the personal and the political, the psychological and the social. It is concerned with understanding how our collective paralysis plays out in both our individual lives and in our culture.' Sergio, although inhabiting a different context and facing a different (though not so different) existential peril, embodies and exemplifies the sense of 'loss, despair, panic and guilt evoked in individuals' (2019: 157) faced with the threat of climate and environmental crisis.

From this reframed context, we can explore Sergio's obsession with *desarrollo* and *subdesarrollo* as a valuable deliberation on the pressing debate about development, underdevelopment, overdevelopment and environmental impact. I also explore Sergio's reflections on revolution and his entrapment between the dying older system in which he played a prominent role and the contradictory and puzzling demands of the new order. Again, Sergio's response is fully commensurate with our individual and collective response today when faced with the knowledge that radical decarbonisation will require nothing short of a revolution. Sergio's dithering is strikingly resonant with our own doubts and hesitation in the face of such a challenge.

Ultimately, and running somewhat against the positions of Desnoes, Gutiérrez Alea, Margot Kernan and Michael Chanan, I propose that Sergio is less tied to his bourgeois past, more willing to adapt, more revolutionary, than is generally considered. Despite the nihilism and despair, Sergio manifests hope in the face of catastrophe, a significant perspective when read analogously against the present.

An Inconsolable Memory

“*Hiroshima mon amour* is a depth charge;³ I can’t remember anything like it since *Rashomon*, the picture that completely changed my sense of reality” (Desnoes 1990: 124).⁴ It is surprising how little critical attention the movie within the novel has engendered,⁵ especially given that the first English translation was called *Inconsolable Memories*. The expression comes from a key moment in *Hiroshima mon amour*, one of many scenes in with the French woman (unnamed throughout) is talking with the Japanese man (also unnamed) in a bedroom. Sergio recalls the scene: “She said something that stuck my head: ‘J’ai désiré avoir une inconsolable mémoire’” (124). Why this expression? Why its impact on Sergio?

Sergio wishes *not* to forget. Not to forget Hiroshima and the incinerated bodies. Even though, as the Japanese man argues with the French woman, she has not *really* seen Hiroshima, she has seen enough through the making of the movie (the character has just acted in a film about Hiroshima) to create a memory of horror that she will keep. Sergio has seen enough through the viewing of the movie. Both she and Sergio wish to hold the bitter and painful memory, the memory that cannot be consoled. Why? It would horrify her to know that she is capable of forgetting something as horrifying as Hiroshima. Sergio, so spell-bound by the movie that he goes to see it twice, chooses to retain his memory of it, to hold it present in his mind whilst watching the carefree daily activities of Havana’s citizens. Their blitheness and joviality irk him.

He continues in his diary: “I suspect civilisation is just that: knowing how to relate things, not forgetting anything. That’s why civilisation is impossible here: Cubans easily forget the past: they live too much in the present” (124). This is one of the many generalised and prejudiced statements that Sergio makes throughout the text about Cuban *subdesarrollo* that have earned Sergio justified criticism (Kernan 1975; Zayas 2013) but when set against his retention of

3 ‘una bomba de profundidad’ (Desnoes 1980: 30)

4 All subsequent English quotations of this novel accompanied only by page numbers have been taken from this edition.

5 Roberto González Echevarría is one of the few to have focused on this: “Sergio is unable to distinguish between the trivial and the significant in his life; the present is too chaotic, fragmented, and partial. His situation is summed up in the line from Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima, mon Amour* that he often repeats: ‘Je voudrais avoir une inconsolable mémoire.’ Like the characters of the film, he can only envisage a telling event in the future, but is indifferent to the collective cataclysm about to take place before his very eyes. As each moment ushers in a new one, as each beginning is replaced by another, both collective and individual memory slip inexorably into oblivion” (113).

memories of *Hiroshima mon amour*, the opinion seems less throwaway and more grounded in a deep and justified anxiety. Forgetting the past and living in the present may be seen as a beneficent quality – living in the eternal now – but for Sergio it is a sign of ignorance, preventing people from understanding the horror of what has happened in recent history and what, in all likelihood, will soon happen again. Thus whilst underdevelopment in Sergio’s opinion is a cultural deficiency in the Cubans that enabled them to be colonised by the US and now colonised by the USSR,⁶ it is also the inability to recognise the evident threat of the horrors of the past recurring in the present.

“I never felt that there was anything beyond the body; I think we’re closer to a piece of machinery than to an incarnate soul, an electronic machine, a machine nonetheless; that’s why the mutilated bodies struck me so. Our body is all we have with which to desire and hate others and to understand” (124). Through all his chauvinistic observations of Cuban women, their bodies and gestures, the sway of their hips, fleshy buttocks and bellies full of black beans,⁷ he cannot and does not wish to escape the knowledge that their bodies, like those in Hiroshima, might turn to ashes. Even at this stage, days, weeks or even months (dates are hard to specify in *Memorias*) before the Missile Crisis, Sergio is weighed down by the anguish of destruction. Like Emmanuelle Riva’s character in *Hiroshima*, Sergio refuses to forget, refuses to return to happy ignorance. He has an inconsolable memory.

The novel, whilst a relatively simple series of undated diary entries, creates a complex drama through the dynamic relationship between the reader and Sergio as character, narrator, protagonist and author. This intricate interplay of text and metatext was well explored by Enrico Mario Santí, likening the narrative twists and turns to Cervantes, Nabokov and Borges (1981: 55). The drama is, indeed, well executed and deserves these comparisons, and Santí dextrously untangles the threads: Sergio writes short stories for Eddy (Desnoes), who edits them before then publishing them in a volume alongside Sergio’s diary entries relating to writing short stories for Eddy. Sergio goes to a public debate to hear Eddy speak on the contemporary novel and lambasts his pomposity.⁸

6 “I ran into a group of Russians again at Hemingway’s house. . . . Always the same. Emissaries of the great world powers, down visiting their colonies” (48).

7 “Now every time I see an attractive female I can’t avoid looking furtively at her softly rounded stomach and wondering: ‘What did you eat today?’” (24).

8 These riddles were dextrously carried over into the film: Sergio Corrieri the actor plays Sergio Malabre the character attending a public debate in which Eddy Desnoes, pompously lighting and smoking a cigar, speaks on the contemporary novel. Meanwhile the director Gutiérrez Alea cameos, showing Sergio censored film clips that, ultimately, form part of the collage landscape of the film *Memorias del subdesarrollo*.

Considering the implications of these riddles, Santí focuses on Sergio's fading literary aspirations and failing literary prospects. González Echevarría (1985) reflects Santí's position: "Desnoes's protagonist remains in Cuba but does not convert to the cause of the Revolution, perhaps because of the ironic realization that the gesture will also become literary, yet another break that will be 'consolable,' that will not effectively remain a present, but will become instead one more space in that selfless text of memory and of writing" (114). These are valuable insights into the complexity of the novel and the convolutions of Sergio's mind. Yet something seems left out in both Santí's and González Echevarría's analyses. They are perhaps *too* Borgesian in the isolation of this literary conundrum and exclusion of the latent will in Sergio to commit to a new revolutionary order. The narrative tension may also be seen as a rigorous self-critique by Desnoes, speaking through Sergio, about his half-hearted and compromised commitment to the Revolution.

"What a farce!" laughs Sergio reminiscing on Eddy's claims that he returned to Cuba from the US in 1960 because the magazine he worked for criticised the Revolution. "He came back because he was a nobody in New York." Watching him in the debate he claims that Eddy "looked like a judge sitting up there on the dais . . . What a phony! . . . I'm sure Eddy felt very important, seated at a solid mahogany table way up over our heads" (143). Sergio also reviews Eddy's novel. "It's so naïve, I don't know what to think. . . . He must have done it to get a place under the Socialist Sun. he must know better!" (142). The self-criticism cuts across the layers: Sergio examines his own inability to act whilst poking holes in Desnoes's willingness to act. It is a tough cynicism that entraps Sergio in stasis and reveals a hollowness in Desnoes's actions.

Whilst isolated and exclusive, Sergio nevertheless is prepared to surrender his former existence. He misses little of it, and takes an almost perverse pleasure in tearing down the structures of his identity: his wife and family, his friend Pablo, business, wealth, position and power. "Pablo is everything I don't want to be. Was I like that before, was I the same as he once? I guess it's possible. . . . I was glad; the revolution, even though it's destroying me, is my revenge against the stupidity of the Cuban bourgeoisie, against my own moronic life" (126). In all his many reflections on his past life, on his love affairs and literary under-achievements, Sergio sees nothing of dignity or integrity. It is for this reason that he welcomes the revolutionary wave that wipes clean his past.⁹ It is his revenge

9 Kernan, on the other hand, argued that Sergio "is the personification of the faded Ivy League, nostalgic for the days when he was perfumed with Yardley aftershave and brushed with Colgate's" (1975: 46). Such a perspective overlooks Sergio's willingness to abandon those days.

not just against his family and Pablo, but against himself. Schaller (2009) highlights this tension:

His furniture business appropriated, his family and friends chased into exile, the privileges of his social rank ruthlessly overturned, he peers into the shadows of his life and confesses that he has lived “abominably.” Disgusted with the bourgeois masquerade that had overtaken his identity and unwilling to embrace the new socialist decorum, he takes an almost masochistic pleasure in his dismantlement. In his undoing he sees his chance to become another man. (195)

Sergio is glad for the Revolution, understanding its need, recognising the inequalities and inequities that represented the semi-colonial and underdeveloped state of Cuban identity and politics prior to the Revolution. He is glad to see the change sweep the island. He sees his chance to become another man yet is prevented by his own reluctance. As such he never will grow into that other man and will remain an isolated loner, like Roquentin in Sartre’s *Nausea* or Mersault in Camus’ *Outsider*.¹⁰ Whilst content with this destruction of his past, he cannot commit to any future, and so hides away tapping idly at the typewriter and fantasising about Noemí as she cleans his apartment. Despite wishing to retain the inconsolable memory, he is eager to lose himself in the present – to console that very memory – through erotic pursuits. “Malabre is a man who has lost his moorings. Never fully at ease in his role as Havana businessman, he has been severed from this existence and set adrift by Cuba’s revolution” (Schaller 2009: 195).

The primary cause for his inertia has been well explored (Menton 1975, Kernan 1975, Santí 1981, González Echevarría 1985): Sergio does not buy the promise of the revolution. This is the fault-line that so bedevilled film reviewers when the film was released in the US (Chanan 1990: 12). Sergio, it was argued, is bourgeois, stuck in the past, critical of the Revolution. He is no revolutionary. The film was thus seen by some as counter-revolutionary, something that Gutiérrez Alea vehemently refuted. Whilst this reading of Sergio may be in part valid, it cannot become verdict, for although retaining some of the bourgeois attributes that he detests in Pablo, Sergio is no counter-revolutionary. “If I still believed in or could even create an illusion about the counterrevolution, it’s all over now, it’s gone to hell” (125). Hence the predicament of Sergio of both the novel and the film. He is trapped, “suspended between the old and the new”

10 José Miguel Oviedo (1975) argues that *Memorias* is a rewriting of *The Outsider* set in Havana, and that Sergio stands as a tropical representation of Mersault.

(Chanan 1990: 4). Unable to commit to the Revolution yet unable to abandon it he is gripped by despair, depression and empty appetite fulfilment. His old life has ended yet nothing has replaced it save the mechanical pacing of Havana's streets and his anguished diary writing. Why can he not commit to the future?

Whilst his evident lack of enthusiasm for the process of Revolution is a compelling reason for his inactivity, there is a deeper reason that emerges at discreet moments in the text, prompted by the viewing of *Hiroshima mon amour* and culminating in the Kennedy speech on the radio. Unlike the film there is no reference to the Bay of Pigs invasion in the novel; yet Sergio, like all Cubans, would have been acutely aware even before the crisis of October 1962 that in a nuclear age any attack on Cuba might well be atomic. "And they said this government wouldn't last another month! I won't worry about the future. We might all blow up before then. The nuclear mushroom is watching me with a smile!" (145). Sergio's reasoning is terrifyingly lucid: the future is neither a bright socialist paradise nor a US-backed resumption of the old order. Neither revolution nor counter-revolution. Commitment to either future is futile with the nuclear mushroom on the horizon. This mushroom, I submit, dominates the text.

This abiding fear is present elsewhere in the novel. Soon after the court case,¹¹ Sergio sleeps an unquiet siesta, drops his book and wakes suddenly in terror: "the strongest attack of anguish . . . no, not anguish, the deepest rupture that I've ever felt between my consciousness and the rest of the world" (163). Is this the grief of his lost social condition and the new political order? No, this is the raw fear of annihilation, the panic of impending doom. "We have this terror, deeply rooted in our consciousness, of being annihilated, of losing contact with the assurance of knowing that 'my name is so-and-so,' . . . It's a silence that first appears as terror, terror in the face of emptiness-silence" (163). This hypnagogic anxiety is a clear indication that, long before the Missile Crisis, Sergio is terrified of the threat of nuclear attack. This brief episode reveals that his inertia derives more than has been acknowledged from this fear of extermination.

Two pages later Sergio lies awake at night reflecting on the mannerisms of Cuban men and women when sunbathing and swimming. These comments about women's bodies are unpleasant, but they do reveal again that nervous fear

11 This court case is horrible on many levels. The unfortunate Elena has to submit to medical examination to prove both rape and her prior virginity and – the judge having ruled in Sergio's favour – and is then institutionalised for mental ill-health. Sergio's nonchalance at her fate, and his relief at having been acquitted, are further indication of his chauvinism and classism. It also reveals a justice system still swayed by class, race and sex, which thus favours the wealthy, white man over the poorer, rural, woman of colour.

in Sergio about human vulnerability. “All in all,” he writes, “people give me the impression of invalid animals defenceless, half hairless, precariously balanced on two feet” (165). At the close of the novel, when the October Crisis is unfolding around him, he returns to this image of human-animal vulnerability: “I can’t visualize the city of Havana destroyed, evaporated by a hydrogen bomb. . . . I feel just like one of the cows on our farm when it rained. They would stand motionless immobile in the middle of a field. Wherever the rain caught them” (169). The fear that has been building throughout the novel grips him, and he summons again the memory of the bathers to visualise their destruction. The earlier image, therefore, whilst peevish, betrays that unarticulated sense of horror and futility: the men showing off their muscles and the women their curves are the useless gestures of livestock before the slaughterhouse. Read in relation to the later scenes, his imagery is particularly bleak.

In the midst of these nocturnal reflections he recalls the storm that rolled in over the bathers and that gave him “the impression of living in a fictitious world” (165). This dream-like quality of the storm is another indication of the deep dark current of fear that flows through him. For the dream is a nightmare: “lightning zigzagged and plunged into the sea”, and in his unsettled mind the storm becomes nuclear. “The sounds of war must be like that, I thought, and I couldn’t help seeing an invasion clamouring like thunder, splitting the island like lightning traveling through a piece of sky” (165). Not only is the experience of the storm terrifying, but it seems likely that this memory, coupled with the heat and his sunburn, is what caused him to wake at 2am. Throughout the novel, therefore, Sergio is gripped by fear. He has an inconsolable memory. And yet, faced with this horror, Sergio declares “I don’t want to remember. I don’t want to have an inconsolable memory” (170). He is trapped.

Sergio has been expecting it. When the voice of Kennedy crackles on the radio there is a sense of resolution. He was already resigned to his fate. Now he can surrender to it. The waves of panic and fear that we have witnessed throughout the novel now finally break over him. Here, also, is the climax of Sergio’s countless comments about development and underdevelopment. The “development” of the Revolution, Sergio miserably comprehends, will lead, inexorably, to nuclear annihilation. This is the tragic irony of the text: Sergio constantly sets his own “underdeveloped” culture and people against the “developed” cultures of Europe and the US. There is no space here to explore his many comments about Laura and her clothing and cosmetics, Elena and her scatty superficiality, Eddy and his faux revolutionary zeal or the Cubans and their inability to relate to concepts. Sergio even rebukes his own underdevelopment – the very quality that brought him back to Havana from New York, that led him to accept his role as furniture store owner and landlord and

to abandon his literary aspirations, that led him to marry a woman and be friends with a man he considers underdeveloped. The very quality that compels him to write patchy diary entries about underdevelopment.

What is significant about this ongoing deliberation about civilisation and development is Sergio's ultimate response to Castro's defiant willingness to lead the country into the nuclear conflict. It bubbles over in almost every punchy exclamation in his diary during the Crisis:

We're on the summit of the world and not in the depths of underdevelopment. (170)

...

We're already a modern country, we have twentieth-century weapons, atomic bombs, we're no longer an insignificant colony, we've already rushed into history, we have the same weapons that the Russians and the Americans rattle at each other. Our power of destruction makes us an equal for a moment to the two great world powers. (171)

...

The Pentagon must already have a plan to destroy us. They'll crush us with the sheer weight of their arms and men. And if the Russians fire their missiles the earth might split in two. All because of Cuba. Never have we been more important nor more miserable. Fighting the United States – we're so small – might have a touch of greatness, but I reject that fate. I would rather go on being underdeveloped. (174)

These are gruelling pages, and the irony of Sergio's long deliberations about underdevelopment is devastating. Only now has his nation achieved a seat at the top table of "developed" nations. Only now does it have the power to compete on the global stage: "*Los ex-ter-mi-na-re-mos,*" Fidel declared just a while ago. Most likely the Pentagon will exterminate us. But he's assumed the responsibility, whatever that is. He grabbed the bull by the horns. Ready for anything. He's mad" (170). This is the tragic conclusion of the novel. What, really, is this development? It is the capacity to kill and be killed on a massive scale. This is the pinnacle of civilisation. It is, Sergio acknowledges, insane. If Europe stands for him as a paragon of development, it is betrayed by his inconsolable memories of a ravaged, scarred, ruined post-war Germany: "everything was twisted" (169), encapsulated in his bitter recollection of a scrum of desperate people diving for his discarded cigarette butt (169). There is no mythic land of developed citizens. There is no development. In the presence of annihilation Sergio has an inconsolable memory of underdevelopment.

Memories of *Memorias*

“So then what happens to the spectator?” asked Gutiérrez Alea about the film adaptation of the novel. “Why does it trouble him or her to such a degree that s/he feels compelled to see the film again?” (Chanan 1990: 190). This is an important question equally valid for the reader of the novel. As is well understood with first-person narratives, the reader must form some bond – some sympathetic resonance – with the narrator-protagonist so as to activate the text. With no bond there is no desire to follow the drama. As explored above, this bond is heightened by the interplay of layers between author, protagonist and character, and, in the film, between screenwriter, director, actor, protagonist and character.

Gutiérrez Alea answers his question:

Because the spectators feel caught in a trap since they have identified with a character who proceeds to destroy himself and is reduced to . . . nothing. The spectators then have to re-examine themselves and all those values, consciously or unconsciously held, that have motivated them to identify with Sergio. They realize that those values are questioned by a reality that is much stronger, much more potent and vital. (Chanan 1990: 190)

The same holds for the novel, and in this respect, *Memorias* can be justifiably considered a revolutionary text. The reader explores the forces that bind Sergio to the pre-revolutionary world, that compel him to renounce that world, that attract him to and repel him from the new political structures, and that prevent him committing to this new order. Having identified with Sergio, the reader thus feels caught in a trap, stuck between structures, systems and ideologies, prepared to let go of the old but unprepared to commit to the future, all the while menaced by a dark fear of oblivion.¹² This, I would argue, is an appropriate analogue of our times.

To begin with, the need for change today is evident. The globalised flow of goods and capital, whilst beneficial at many levels, is increasingly beneficial for fewer, increasingly harmful for more and increasingly toxic for the environment. The change must be based on decarbonisation. The need is pressing and the process must be radical. Naomi Klein is explicit about this radical transformation: “There are ways of preventing this grim future, or at least making it a lot

12 With this close critical relationship, Sergio’s more unpleasant attributes, such as his intellectual, cultural and sexual chauvinism, strike the reader particularly hard. This always arises in seminars with students.

less dire. But the catch is that these also involve changing everything. For us high consumers, it involves changing how we live, how our economies function, even the stories we tell out our place on earth” (2014: 4).¹³ As Heatley et al. more recently explain in *Facing up to Climate Reality* (2019), radical decarbonisation is a wholesale restructuring of our economic, political, social and cultural systems. It is a colossal undertaking. It is a revolution. It must happen in order to prevent – or mitigate – widespread destruction and loss. This is chilling news, and whilst it has been news for decades, its presence in daily discourse has increased significantly since the school strikes for climate inspired by Greta Thunberg and the disruptions of Extinction Rebellion. Cities, regions and even national governments are now declaring a climate emergency and are pledging – with varying degrees of urgency – processes of decarbonisation.

Significantly, the language of revolution is not coming from marginalised radicals: the sober and sombre IPCC Special Report 2018 advocates “transformational adaptation” as an imperative.¹⁴ Neither are the warnings of disaster coming from latter-day doomsday cults: again the IPCC report draws on robust scientific data and analysis. As John Foster said in a May 2019 launch address at SOAS, “let’s be frank folks: we are talking about a revolution”.¹⁵ This is reiterated by Rupert Read (2019: 27): “The demands of the Extinction Rebellion are ‘impossible’ demands. They are simply not reconcilable with even a reformed version of politics or economics as usual. They could only be accommodated by putting in process a revolutionary transformation in our entire way of life.”

However, like Sergio, there is an apparent collective reluctance to commit, transform or adapt. “Why isn’t more being done about dangerous human-triggered climate change?” ask Heatley et al. (2019: 1), and they provide a number of responses, from defence of economic growth and development, mistrust in science and evidence, trust in comforting denial propaganda, fear of change and “the pervasive feeling that dangerous climate change remains remote, abstract and diffuse” (2019: 2). What lies at the heart of all these factors, however, is “the stark, categorical truth that things are now certainly going to get worse – much

13 Klein argues that the need for change is especially clear to those who benefit the most, and hence their vocal denialism, thwarting of alternatives and the implementation of policies designed to enrich them even further before the system changes or is forced to change. Such characters may be characterised by Pablo, who cannot fault or abandon the old model and can only see deficiencies in alternatives.

14 A phrase adapted, with significant differences in meaning, to “deep adaptation” (Bendell 2018) and “transformative adaptation” (Heatley et al. 2019: 4).

15 Cited from my notes of the event. Foster’s 15-minute talk was unscripted.

worse – *whatever* we do” (2019: 3). This is a terrifying situation that inevitably renders irrelevant any “progressive” policy or action.

This is Sergio’s predicament: inertia in the face of disaster. “There’s no reason for me to write at all now. It’s all meaningless. Nothing has happened, but I feel asphyxiated” (169). He has lost purpose and motivation and lives in a state of agitation, and nobody seems to share his fear: “People – I’ve just come back from the street – move about and talk as if war were just a game. . . . They’re mad. So serene that it’s admirable” (169). Heatley et al. address directly this astonishment at the collective ability to continue as if nothing is awry: “this book [*Facing up to Climate Reality*] seeks to manifest *climate honesty*. It considers why we refuse to face the reality of our situation or think straight about how that reality will unfold” (2019: 3). This anxious state of torpor is recognised as a natural response to understanding the true implications of climate heating and ecosystem collapse. However, it is what Andrews and Hoggart would describe as “ecologically maladaptive” (2019: 161) as it dampens the spirit, saps the will, reduces alternative activities and strategies to futile gestures and, ultimately, prevents action. However justifiable and inevitable, such inertia is acquiescent to the very systems that cause the damage.

Yet how to act? Once again Sergio inhabits the fault-line. As discussed, there is a revolutionary spirit to Sergio. Gutiérrez Alea, Chanan and Desnoes recognise that Sergio is critical of the Revolution, yet we should not overlook his evident, if occluded, support for change. He has undergone a radical transformation in his relationship with material indicators of status, such as his business, family and friends, his belongings (especially his wife’s) and his car. Through their loss he recognises how much he has gained.

Since they nationalized my car along with the furniture store, I’m much more serene. No longer having to worry about filling the tank all the time, changing the oil now and then, parking in the right place. . . . I want to unload my problems, get them off my back. The revolution has taken quite a load off my back. A car is a pain in the ass. . . . Nothing that’s too complicated is worth doing. (127)

Whilst in Sergio’s case this is a limited transformation which certainly would not classify him as a shining example of Guevara’s *New Man* (Schaller 2009), it is significant. George Monbiot has dedicated years of publications precisely to the question of how our obsession with *stuff* drives so much environmental damage. He has long advocated the type of awareness that Sergio experienced, that buying and owning fewer things constitutes fewer worries, fewer complications, less

impact upon the environment. A virtuous circle. Monbiot's recent broadside is, precisely, against the car.¹⁶ Sergio willingly surrenders his car, unburdens himself, and regains the pleasure of walking and the contact with people and the city. He has awakened to "degrowth", a necessary antidote to "growthism," the deadly ideology of neoliberalism.¹⁷

We can return to Sergio's deliberations on underdevelopment, best explored in his visit to Hemingway's house-museum. This episode, in which Sergio attempts to instil in Elena some culture, to give her some "development", was written for the film then incorporated into later editions of the novel. Sergio recognises Elena's "natural intelligence" as she absently recognises the underdevelopment of Hemingway. She recognises the smell of the house as identical to the house of the Prestons, US sugar mill owners in eastern Cuba, where she worked as a child, a place of sadness and cruelty. Sergio reluctantly acknowledges that she is right, that there is no difference between neo-colonial sugar bosses and Hemingway. "Cuba never really meant a fucking thing to Hemingway" (139). Most of all, Sergio recognises his own subordinate position in relation to the author: "I feel love and hate toward Hemingway; I admire him and at the same time he humiliates me" (138).

Sergio has another awakening to "degrowth" in Hemingway's house when presented with the copious possessions within: "Something about it [the room] and everything in it revealed a deep disregard for life. People waste and throw away and act generously when they have everything in abundance" (135). The dead animals staring from the walls, the tiger skin on the floor, the images of bullfights, the photos of war, and the countless bottles of liquor expose Hemingway's wretchedness rather than his sophistication.¹⁸ The episode at Hemingway's house is important for an evaluation of the multiple and contradictory meanings of the terms "developed" and "underdeveloped" and the increasingly hazy distinction between the terms when evaluated through the prism of the novel.

16 "Carmageddon: it's killing urban life. We must reclaim our cities before it's too late" (2019).

17 "Onwards and upwards may be a deeply familiar metaphor for progress, but in terms of the economy that we know, it has taken us into dangerous terrain" (Raworth 2017: 45). "It is crucial that we resist growthism. . . . Growth will end because of collapse than because of informal decision" (Read and Alexander 2019: 23).

18 In the film, Sergio summarises Hemingway's character with biting insight: "he killed so as not to kill himself" (Desnoes and Gutiérrez Alea 1990: 70).

As explored, Sergio ultimately sees the peak of his nation's development – its pretence at “civilisation” – as involvement in a nuclear squabble between super-powers. Here, finally, he can witness his nation's rise from underdevelopment to development. “We're all one, I'll die like everybody else. This island is a trap and the revolution is tragic because we're too small to survive, to come through. Too poor and too few. It's quite an expensive dignity. The revolution is too big for us” (170). With the success of the film in Europe and the US, such pressing questions about civilisation and development unsettled the audiences, a brutal irony seized by Michael Chanan:

The epilogue is constructed with such understatement that it allowed them [film critics] to identify completely with Sergio's own sentiments in the face of nuclear annihilation, failing to perceive the irony in his alienated response. They would have said, “And if it started right now? It would be no use protesting. I'll die like the rest. This island of Manhattan (or Britain) is a trap. We've got all the riches in the world and it won't do us any good. What price our dignity now?” They would have said this and not seen the difference. (1990: 11–12)

I consider these critical responses cited by Chanan as the most vital and engaged, confirming the capacity of the film to complexify and problematise simplistic responses, a quality the film successfully transfers from the novel. Chanan presents it as ironic that these critics would not have seen the difference, but to me there is none. What difference do economics or politics make to nations faced with mutual annihilation? Does this simple observation not make nuclear weaponry obviously senseless? Does it not confirm a need to abolish nuclear weapons? The threat of nuclear annihilation hangs over us just as it hung over Sergio in 1962 and the film audiences in the Cold War. Yet in relation to anthropogenic climate change and environmental collapse, the threat to civilisation and development is equally pressing.

Progressive policies of diverse forms have been framed for many years within the language of Sustainable Development. These ideas were consolidated by the UN in 2000 as the Millennium Development Goals and in 2015 as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals have tremendous scope and impact and have motivated projects in countless areas. Yet there is a growing disquiet around the implications of the term “development” as a key focus of the goals. Scoffham (2019) summarises the various criticisms levied at the SDGs: “The goals perpetuate the myth of endless economic growth, . . . appear to endorse free trade without any caveats, . . . are aligned with neo-liberal interests in which profit and resource extraction are the key drivers rather than the need to develop

new notions of prosperity and sustainable living.”¹⁹ This strikes at the heart of the problem. If the entire world were to achieve the level of GDP based upon its current indicators, global carbon emissions would be calamitous.²⁰ Yet upon what moral basis can GDP-rich nations deny growth and development to other nations?²¹ The dilemmas around growth and degrowth, “developing” and “developed” nations, are not easily solved.²² “Here’s the conundrum,” explains Kate Raworth in the influential *Doughnut Economics*: “No country has ever ended human deprivation without a growing economy. And no country has ever ended ecological degradation with one” (2017: 208).²³

Yet the dilemma must be tackled, beginning with scrutinising the still-popular expressions “Developed and Developing Worlds” to designate what until recently were termed “First World and Third World”. Upon what basis is a nation considered “developed” beyond the crude indicators of GDP? The prevalence of injustice, inequality, violence, corruption and environmental destruction of nations of the global north challenges the qualities of “development.” Is it “developed” to continue exploration, extraction and burning of fossil fuels in a climate that is increasingly seen as an emergency?

The contradictions that entangle Sergio around development and underdevelopment remain contradictory today. As contradictions, they lead Sergio into an evident state of disorientation. This is evident throughout the novel. The Russians, Sergio observes, are just like the North Americans, another wave of imperialists, taking photos of the “beautiful señorita” Elena at Hemingway’s house. “Always the same,” he muses. “Emissaries of the great world power down visiting their colonies. The same fucking tourists” (132). Just as he observes Elena as developed and underdeveloped at the same time, so Sergio cannot reconcile the notion that the Soviets, allies of the Revolution,

19 Cited with permission of the author from a workshop handout titled “A Bridge to the Future: Making Sense of the SDGs” (February 2019).

20 “[D]evelopment’ as we know it today is not the path to poverty resolution and in fact development is arguably more often responsible for (re)producing it. Likewise, turning the Global South into the Global North would be utterly catastrophic, especially ecologically” (Read and Alexander 2019: 36).

21 “Calling the SDG 8 ‘inclusive and sustainable economic growth’ only compounds the deceit” (Scoffham 2019).

22 The questions form a central feature of Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow*.

23 Ironically enough, Cuba offers a possible exception to this rule. In the World Wildlife Fund’s Living Planet report, Cuba currently ranks first in the Sustainable Development Index.

have no more commitment to radical change than the US, no more than Desnoes, no more than himself. Sergio struggles to accommodate the contradiction. Everything is in flux; no concept is stable, least of all his notions of development. “Underdevelopment and civilization,” he writes forlornly. “Never learn” (174).

Sergio’s confusion is another valuable analogue of our times. “Everything I do seems weird to me” (173), he writes, reflecting on the weirdness of his quotidian life whilst troops and tanks mobilise for nuclear war. Klein captures this sense of contradiction in the essential climate denialism universally and justifiably manifest: “Living with this kind of cognitive dissonance is simply part of being alive in this jarring moment in history, when a crisis we have been studiously ignoring is hitting us in the face – and yet we are doubling down on the stuff that is causing the crisis in the first place” (Klein 2014: 3). Sergio struggles to live with contradictions, as do we. The UK as member of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) made pioneering pledges towards decarbonisation at the Paris Agreement in 2015. However, the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) Summary Report of July 2019 makes explicit the distance between the pledges and the current actions led by the government: “tougher targets do not themselves reduce emissions”, reads the Foreword. It continues: “In these circumstances, although the UK is committed to working for global action to parallel our own adoption of a net-zero statutory target, it is prudent to plan adaptation strategies for a scenario of 4°C, but there is little evidence of adaptation planning for even 2°C. Government cannot hide from these risks.” When pressed on the contradictions, ministers resort to the sacrosanct imperatives of economic growth and development. We are all expected to accommodate such self-evident incongruities.

It is not only the governments and public institutions manifesting this contradiction. Just as Sergio recognises his own underdevelopment whilst critiquing the underdevelopment of others, so Klein candidly recognises denialism in herself: “We engage in this odd form of on-again-off-again ecological amnesia for perfectly rational reasons. We deny because we fear that letting in the full reality of this crisis will change everything. And we are right” (2014: 4). This resonates strongly with me: as a *cubanista* I have over the past two decades flown to Cuba over a dozen times, and have facilitated the journeys of many dozens of students. Institutional links with Cuba and other Latin American countries are a key element in my university department’s structure, which I have been enthusiastic in fomenting. Like professionals in so many industries, it is now incumbent on academics to reappraise their relationship with air travel, and yet we continue to fly and justify the need even when presented with evidence of emissions. “We’re all quite mad,” declares Sergio. “Everybody believes what he wants to believe,

even if reality keeps proving the exact opposite to you every minute” (127). Once again, Sergio’s voice resonates from the past.

Conclusion: Hope

We come now to the final element of this article: hope. If, as I have argued, the novel is first dominated by the fear of catastrophe and, secondly, is pertinent today, can we detect any hope in the text? Does the analogous reading of the novel in today’s crisis provide a message of hope? My answer, despite the gloom, is yes.

First, we must return to Sergio’s nascent revolutionary consciousness. As perhaps one of the first truly conscious actions in his life, he remained in Cuba whilst his peers left. He then willingly surrendered (some of) the material trappings of status. Desnoes was inspired by Sartre, especially after his visit to Cuba in 1960 with Simone de Beauvoir (Rowlandson 2018). Sartre was explicit in his essay “Existentialism is a humanism” that his philosophy, contrary to the venomous critical reception of *Being and Nothingness*, was optimistic.²⁴ To strip away ideologies and belief systems and to confront the meaninglessness of existence is to liberate one’s potential to act in good faith and build new and worthwhile meaning. To confront the void is an act of liberation. Sergio, like Roquentin in *Nausea*, has undergone the arduous stripping back of the structures of his existence. He can now move forward, unburdened by the past. Unlike Pablo, he is prepared to adapt, and it may be argued that were it not for fear of the bomb he would be more committed to revolutionary initiatives. This capacity in Sergio is important: the will to transform is the first requirement for transformational (or transformative) adaptation.

Secondly, we must consider the diaries themselves. Despite his torments, Sergio has engaged in the creative process. This, again, is an indication of will and desire, and it demonstrates his need to leave a legacy, a message for future generations. Any creative act, however nihilistic in outlook, is still an affirmation of will, a hope for readership and communication. Although Gutiérrez Alea rebukes Sergio for being bound by bourgeois values, Sergio does nevertheless engage in a revolutionary battle of ideas in his own diaries, which he bequeaths to his readers through his author, Eddy. This is a sign of hope, reflected neatly by Bill McKibben in *Falter*: “A writer doesn’t owe a reader hope – the only obligation is honesty – but I want those who pick up this volume to know that its author lives in a state of engagement, not despair. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have

24 “Existentialism cannot be regarded as a philosophy of quietism since it defines man by his action; nor as a pessimistic description of man, for no doctrine is more optimistic, the destiny of man is placed within himself.”

bothered writing what follows” (2019: iii). Bleak as Sergio’s narrative is, the same might be said for *Memorias*.

Lastly, and perhaps ironically, we can consider Sergio’s own self-description in the time of crisis. “I’m a mediocre man”, he laments, “a modern man, a link in the chain, a worthless cockroach. . . . I’m going to die and that’s all. All right, I accept it. I’m not going to try to sneak away through the cracks like a cockroach. There aren’t any more cracks left. Cracks and holes and shelters are over” (175). Gutiérrez Alea seizes on this image as a sign of Sergio’s weakness and powerlessness, suggesting that “At the end of the film, the protagonist ends up like a cockroach – squashed by his fear, by his impotence, by everything” (190). This may seem bleak, but perhaps the film director missed a subtle show of hope and defiance in Sergio, reflected in the old legend that cockroaches are capable of surviving the nuclear blast and radiation that would kill other species. Encoded in this bleak image is the possibility of hope for survival. This is borne out by history: Sergio did survive. The Missile Crisis was negotiated, the direct telephone line was established between Washington and Moscow, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) was dismantled, and Eddy published Sergio’s diaries and short stories. Positive outcomes emerged from the crisis.

To reframe the novel against a narrative of climate catastrophe, can we perceive hope? Hope is a challenging grace that vexes every writer on the subject. Heatley et al., for example, introduce their book with the undertaking to tell the truth about climate reality and to present the bleak message that we have passed the point of preventing disaster. We can now only hope to mitigate and survive. Little room for comfort there. And yet, Foster reserves the final chapter, his own, to articulate a vision of hope. It *is* possible to pursue radical decarbonisation, even in the short timespan indicated by the 2018 IPCC report. It *is* possible to transform society in a short time. After all (though Foster does not mention it) this was the case in Cuba, and whilst the transformation faltered on numerous fronts, it was nevertheless a radical restructuring of the social, political and economic matrix.

Sergio’s final wistful diary entries are enigmatic yet curiously optimistic: “staying alive also means destroying any deep moment of intensity” suggests his recognition that life is only truly felt – with all its pains and all its pleasures – when threatened with death. And the final words of the novel “Go beyond words” – could suggest that Sergio is keen to move beyond his disconsolate diary, beyond his withering literary ambitions and to commit to new more committed aspirations. There is the suggestion not only of hope for survival, but for a richer and more fulfilling existence.

Revolutions do happen. Humans are tenacious; and all the writers cited in this article – whether Sergio, journalist, economist, environmentalist, agriculturalist,

social scientist, carbon scientist – insist that there is hope. There must be hope, as it is only through hope that transformation can occur.

Coda – Covid-19

The article was submitted for review in the autumn of 2019, and the revisions have taken place during the Covid-19 lockdown. So as not to lengthen the article, nor add further layers of analysis, I have chosen not to incorporate any discourse related to the viral pandemic. However, the pertinence of the issue must be acknowledged in relation both to Sergio's fear of death and collapse of civilisation, and contemporary Climate Studies. Pandemics are – as we have long known and are now experiencing – an ever-present threat to humanity. They are a threat that has increased due to human interference with natural systems, climate heating and loss of species and habitats. Many of the questions raised in the article concerning inertia and impotence in the face of catastrophe, individual and state response to disaster, and the need for revolutionary action, may be considered in relation to impact of Covid-19.

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