

Inconsolable Memories



Two-channel 16mm
film installation (loop)
15 permutations
5:39 min. each



More radically than other installations, *Inconsolable Memories* deals with the “Past Imperfect” of a derailed time. Set in nineteen-eighties Cuba, the work contrasts the principles of revolutionary teleology with a combinatorial model of space and time: purposive progression and historical consistency are replaced by the possibility and indeterminacy of events as well as the contingency of their coincidental connections.

The work is based on two intermeshing 16mm loops unequal in length. Both consist of a series of black-and-white film sequences and blank film projected with a time offset onto the same screen. Each loop thus repeats a certain sequence of scenes but also alternates with the other loop in ever changing combinations. Two discrete narrative threads, each with a set duration, thus join to create a flexible construct of links in space and time. At the same time, this combinatorial system incorporates moments of partial congruence, for example when the image sequences of both loops coincide in the two-line intertitles or when the sound-

track of one loop overlays the picture of the other.

Inconsolable Memories combines three historical layers of time, that are in turn inflected by the perspective of a film source, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s film *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*) from 1968. This film, set in 1962 during the Cuba crisis, is about a young intellectual who stays behind in Cuba alone after his friends and family have left the island. Within his apartment in the Focsa building in downtown Havana, and while walking around the city, he recalls his past in imaginary and remembered encounters and events, questioning his relationship to a radically changing social present.

The architecture of the Focsa building, erected in 1956 under Batista as a landmark of a prospering, progressive Cuba, is almost iconic, standing as it does for the ambivalence of Cuban history itself. At that time the highest building on the island, it offered a hitherto unknown comfort of which the educated middle class, above all, initially took advan-

tage. As numerous inhabitants left the island after the Revolution, the now vacant apartments were given to deserving protagonists of the new regime. Since then, the Focsa building has, to a large extent, fallen into disrepair and is consequently an architectural symbol of the (delayed) end of modernist utopias.

Inconsolable Memories is set in 1980, the year of the Mariel boatlift. Sergio, who in Douglas’s scenario is not a white intellectual but rather a black architect, lives in the Focsa building like his reference character. The apartment belongs to his wife Laura, who left Cuba with his friend Pablo in 1975. Sergio stays on alone. The following year, Pablo sends him a parcel with unspecified contents from his American exile, which gets Sergio a four-year prison term. In 1980, the government gives him the option of either leaving Cuba on a ship to the U.S. or remaining in prison. Sergio accepts the offer to leave the country but escapes before the boat sets sail. Meanwhile, a young woman, Elena, has moved into his apartment, who watches and analyzes Amer-

ican television news for a living. Opposite her lives Jimmy, who accuses Sergio in a violent argument of a deception, the background of which, however, remains a mystery.

The historical and narrative layers of time in the installation are multiply intermeshed and ramified with flashbacks and flashforwards, repetitions and blanks. Their common points of reference are the changing interiors of Laura's/Sergio's/Elena's apartment along with a number of motifs that keep appearing in different variations like echoes of past or harbingers of future events: Laura's dress, left behind in her apartment and worn by the new tenant, Laura's revenant; the postcard that Laura sends Sergio from New York, now existing in Elena's private domestic setting as an element of decadent (qua detached from the context of personal memory) interior decoration; a recurrent melody, conversations, and monologues that, divorced from any fixed pictorial reference, creep into different presents. The installation hence creates a migration of motifs that always refer both forward and backward.

This intangibility of the now is supported by the obviously quotational film language, such as film noir references or outdoor shots reminiscent of early Hollywood productions reenacted in the studio, as well as by the different forms of indirect, elusive speech. Douglas's characters not only consistently express themselves in translation mode, in English spoken with a Cuban accent, but they also employ various—pointedly highlighted—recording and transmission media. Thus, as Sergio notes, Laura's speech captured on tape becomes potential evidence against her; Sergio himself accidentally listens in on a telephone conversation that makes him an unwilling accomplice; Elena, in turn, acquires the ideological idiom of the "enemy" and translates it into her own. And even the language of the Revolution is subject to constant semantic shifts, in the process of which "words devour words." Douglas's characters stand between languages as they stand between times.

KATRIN MUNDT