

film

The Social Imaginary of Arcibel's Game

Crystal Downing

MY DISGUST OVER THE NEWLY INSTITUTED \$15 luggage fee was intensified when an airline agent informed me that my suitcase, packed for the Christmas holidays, weighed three pounds over the fifty-pound limit. Fortunately, the problem was easily solved: I opened my bag and extracted Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Harvard 2007). A bit disgruntled that I now had to tote the three pound, 880 page tome through six-flights and four airport layovers, I decided that if I have to lift it I'm going to read it. So, ignoring slimmer books I had slipped into my purse, I perused the unruly mass. There I discovered, amidst annoying redundancy and idiosyncratic punctuation, intriguing analysis that might be brought to bear on a profoundly-insightful, beautifully-constructed Argentine film: *Arcibel's Game* [*El Juego de Arcibel*, Dir. Alberto Lecchi, 2003].

Set in a fictional South American country called Miranda, *Arcibel's Game* focuses on an unassuming, nondescript man, Arcibel Alegria, who writes a column on chess for a major newspaper in the state capital. When one of his columns, about pawns overpowering the king, is published next to an article about Miranda's dictator, Arcibel is thrown into prison as a political agitator—even though it was his editor who situated the column and added a statement about the “feeling of hope” that “followed in Miranda.”

After twenty years in prison Arcibel is given a cellmate: an illiterate drug-addict called Pablo. Frustrated in his attempts to teach Pablo how to read and play chess, Arcibel invents a game to aid in the process. He draws a map of Miranda on their cell floor and writes war “situation” cards, to be picked from a pile during each player's turn, that illustrate potential problems that pawns/peons must surmount as they attempt to

capture the king/dictator. Though Arcibel's goal is merely to train a suitable chess opponent, Pablo escapes from prison and applies the moves he learned from Arcibel's game to instigate an actual revolution that overthrows Miranda's dictator. Ironically, then, Arcibel, incarcerated for unintentional revolutionary messages embedded within a chess column, unintentionally ends up instigating a revolution through chess.

But it would do disservice to this fascinating film to leave it at that. In Charles Taylor's terms, *Arcibel's Game* is about changing the “social imaginary.” In *A Secular Age*, Taylor outlines how European culture changed from a medieval world view, in which a universe without God's intervention was unthinkable, to a secular one in which God's direct intervention is unthinkable. He relates this difference to the social imaginary, which he defines as “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings”: “[O]ften not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc.”

Taylor's “etc.” might include the word “games.” Indeed, *Arcibel's Game* establishes a direct correlation between the game Arcibel teaches Pablo and the social imaginary behind the revolution. In the film's opening shot, we see a brown mosaic of six-sided tiles over which is drawn some kind of outline. Only later—much later—do we discover that those hexagonal brown tiles cover the floor of Arcibel's cell, where he has mapped out Miranda and its major cities in order to teach Pablo the theory behind chess. By the end of the film, of course, we see that Arcibel has taught Pablo how to *imagine* a Miranda without a dictator, a Miranda in which pawns can corner a king.

More importantly, the film establishes that Arcibel's game has affected more than Pablo; it has shaped a new *social* imaginary—a shared way

of thinking about political surroundings. This becomes clear as revolutionaries start spray-painting hexagons on walls and streets as part of their protest. Note the relevance of Taylor's comments:

What exactly is involved, when a theory penetrates and transforms the social imaginary? Well for the most part, people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices. These are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory; this outlook is the context that gives sense to the practices. And the new understanding... begins to define the contours of their world, and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things.... (175–76).

Like the taken-for-granted shape of the hexagon, *Arcibel's Game* reinforces the idea of a social imaginary by refusing to pander to the Hollywood cliché in which an autonomous hero, “who doesn't play by the rules,” saves the day, either by leading a revolution through outrageously courageous exploits, or, more often than not, by overthrowing the enemy all by himself. In contrast, *Arcibel's Game* is not about individualized heroics. Pablo plays by the rules of the game that Arcibel taught him. In fact, after he escapes from prison, we never see Pablo lead anything; we only hear of his moves—and of his death—from a government official who interrogates Arcibel in prison.

The interrogation occurs because Arcibel's name is repeatedly invoked by the revolutionaries—who have no idea that the actual Arcibel is merely a feeble old man. Indeed, when they overrun the prison where Arcibel has lived for thirty years, the revolutionaries—chanting “Arcibel! Arcibel!”—fail to notice the white-haired chess-player that walks out among them. As though in illustration of Charles Taylor's point, the film thus establishes that Arcibel's game, as part of the social imaginary, instigates more change than can Arcibel or Pablo as autonomous human beings.

Arcibel's Game, in fact, challenges the entire notion of human autonomy. It does so in a subplot

that would fascinate even those who dislike political intrigue. Early in the film, viewers are introduced to Arcibel as a feckless young man who has just finished a chess column titled “A Cornered Black King.” After his editor appropriates and changes the column, Arcibel walks city streets alone and attends a movie alone, his solitude exacerbated by a vicious ex-wife who refuses to let him see their daughter, Rosalinda. Entering his apartment alone, he dreams of a luminous teenage girl to whom he gave popcorn intended for Rosalinda. But even in the dream Arcibel does not achieve human connection, turning his face away when the girl tries to kiss him. The dream is interrupted by police who beat, then interrogate Arcibel, finally sending him off to prison despite his protests that he is not at all “political.” We see that he connects neither with humans nor with causes.

In prison Arcibel meets numerous men that *are* political: revolutionaries who failed to change the social imaginary. But he keeps himself emotionally walled off from them, symbolized throughout the film with a wall motif. When Arcibel first enters jail, an inmate in an adjacent cell, Dr. Palacios, attempts to tap out messages on their shared wall, but Arcibel makes no effort to understand. Later, on the way to the latrine, Palacios tells Arcibel how they can play chess by tapping codes on the wall, but Arcibel gives up during his first attempt.

Reinforcing Arcibel's self-imposed emotional isolation is a scene soon to follow. Called to the prison's visiting room, Arcibel waits behind a wall of glass, somewhat baffled as to who might want to see him. When a stranger takes the visitor seat, we learn that guards had confused Arcibel with a prisoner who has the same last name. The scene immediately cuts from the clear glass of the visiting booth to an image of the prison yard shot through blurry and cracked glass, as though to comment on Arcibel's view of reality. We discover that the camera is looking through the cracked glasses of an emotionally-unstable inmate who tells Arcibel, “You are like me: nobody visits you. That means you haven't been a good person out there.” The unstable inmate has been dubbed Judas because he betrayed his fellow revolutionaries, putting his own self-interest above both friendship and

politics. To cement the parallel, the film has Judas say “I don’t believe in God,” echoing an earlier scene when Arcibel answers someone’s question “Do you believe in God?” with an apathetic “No.” Arcibel, like Judas, has walled himself off from vertical as well as horizontal relationships.

Following this scene is a baffling interpolation: in a brief take we see Arcibel’s beautiful five-year-old daughter bathed in sunlight as she watches an outdoor basketball game. The shot then cuts back to a view of Arcibel through Judas’s blurry and cracked lens—as though to suggest that something beautiful is trying to invade and subvert Arcibel’s blurry and cracked vision of reality. Indeed, in the next scene, Arcibel starts making connections, if even obliquely: he agrees to a wall-tapping chess match with Dr. Palacios, and he brings excitement to scores of inmates when he initiates a game of roulette in the prison laundry room, writing numbers on the rolling agitator of an industrial washing machine.

These human connections—mediated through games—are followed by another interpolation, once again filled with fresh air and sunlight: Arcibel dreams of the luminous teenage girl, but this time, rather than turning away, he plays chess with her. When the camera returns us to the jail yard filled with political prisoners, the shot briefly cuts to an image of little Rosalinda watching basketball, followed by a shot of activities in the yard through Judas’s broken glasses. This montage of radically different images suggests that different views of reality are competing for mastery within Arcibel’s psyche.

The real change begins when Arcibel reads a book from the prison library called *Zen Buddhism: The Art of Meditation in Front of the Wall*. Upon finishing the book, Arcibel faces his cell wall, both literally and figuratively, dissolving its barrier in his mind. We are given an extreme close-up on his eyes facing the wall, and as the shot slowly pulls back, we discover that Arcibel is much older: a clever way to communicate not only the lapse of many years, but also that Arcibel has maintained his practice of meditation into his middle age.

After the extreme close-up on Arcibel’s meditating eyes, we never again view the prison through the cracked and blurry lens of the Judas

glasses. Instead we soon see—through glass as clear as a camera lens—something beautiful. Arcibel is called to the visiting chamber, the first time since he was incorrectly called sixteen years before. Through the wall of glass, he views a lovely young woman: his daughter, now grown. Rosalinda tells Arcibel that she had been told her father died with the national basketball team in a plane crash, and we slowly realize that the earlier dreamlike interpolations of the young Rosalinda watching basketball reflect a significant cinematic technique: crosscutting, in which a film juxtaposes shots of simultaneous actions in different locations. Thus, while Arcibel was serving his time in prison and not connecting with anyone, except through games, his young daughter was attending basketball games in an attempt to connect with him. Only as an adult, when she starts working for Arcibel’s former newspaper as a crossword and horoscope writer, does Rosalinda discover the actual fate of her father.

She continues to visit him in prison, and at one point we see Arcibel raise his hand in an attempt to touch Rosalinda’s fingers resting on the glass between them. As he leaves the visiting booth, Arcibel asks the guard, “When did they put in that glass?” We are as baffled by the question as the guard, who explains that the glass has “always” been there. But with a bit of reflection, we realize that Arcibel has just made a tremendous breakthrough: he finally feels connected enough to someone that he notices, and cares about, the physical barrier between them. He has come a long way from the blurry, cracked vision of the Judas glasses.

The connection Arcibel makes with Rosalinda ties together the two thematic strands of the film: the emotional—Arcibel’s breaking down of emotional walls—and the political, revolutionaries literally breaking down the walls of Arcibel’s prison. For Rosalinda is key to both. In her crossword clues and horoscope prophecies she inserts messages of love to her father, who has access to the newspaper in prison. Later, when the Arcibel-educated Pablo escapes from prison and leads a revolt, she uses the same means to communicate hidden messages to the revolutionaries—something revealed only at the end of the film.

But the film inserts several clues—like the clues Rosalinda inserts in her crosswords—that point to her political involvement. Immediately after we see a follower of Che Guevara punch a government official who has called him a “former revolutionary,” we see Rosalinda punch a government official who refuses to pardon her innocent father. In other words, she acts like a revolutionary. Later, we get repeated close-ups of Rosalinda’s photo on Arcibel’s cell wall, indicating that she will be key to the wall’s dissolving—both emotionally and politically. Her imaginative use of crosswords and horoscopes, then, ultimately contributes to a change not only in Arcibel’s imagination, but also in the social imaginary.

Significantly, the film establishes that Arcibel’s relationship with his daughter evolves at the same time as his slowly-developing relationship with Pablo, who ignites the revolution. In fact, Arcibel’s first conversation with his new cellmate occurs after we see Pablo’s shadow on the wall next to the photograph of Rosalinda—as though to say that Pablo will join Rosalinda in breaking down the literal and figurative barriers surrounding Arcibel. When Pablo asks Arcibel why

he is in prison, the latter’s answer foreshadows the game that will teach Pablo how to change the social imaginary: “A bad move in a senseless country.” In the next scene, Arcibel teaches Pablo the good moves of the prison roulette game, its political potential symbolized when the prison television soon broadcasts the fall of the Berlin wall. Indeed, when Arcibel helps Pablo break out of prison, he and the Che Guevara disciple cover up the noise by repeatedly slamming the lid of the washing machine that served as their roulette wheel. The game contributes to revolution.

Pablo is able to break out because he has broken through Arcibel’s emotional barrier, having assimilated not only the rules of his games but also the insights of his philosophy. This becomes

evident when we see Pablo and Arcibel sitting side by side in their cell, both cross-legged, facing the wall in meditation. Significantly, the scene is shot in chiaroscuro, a heavy shadow dividing the wall in half. We see the men from behind, such that one figure is framed by a square of black shadow on the wall, the other framed by a square of light from the hall—making them look like two chess pieces on the dark and light squares of a board.

After breaking out of prison, Pablo first visits Rosalinda and tells her “I am everything your father taught me to be.” Significantly, we never see Pablo again in the film, except when Arcibel once again dreams of the luminous teenage girl. In this dream Arcibel holds the girl in his arms, but then his dream pans from her to an image of Rosalinda, then of Pablo, then the Che Guevara disciple, then Dr. Palacios, and back to the teenage girl. We see that Arcibel’s personal imagination had to embrace other people before his game could effectively change the social imaginary.

Arcibel’s Game, then, is about love. It implies that revolutions not based on

love—for the common people as well as for justice and equity—are not worth having. Arcibel implies as much when he tells his interrogator at the end of the film, “If those who want to change everything act like those who want nothing changed, they’d better stop playing.” It is as though he has read moral philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev, who states in *Slavery and Freedom* (1944), “The horror which is associated with revolution certainly does not belong to the ends which it usually pursues; these ends are commonly freedom, justice, equality, brotherhood, and the like exalted values. The horror is associated with the means it employs.”

Fortunately, thanks to Arcibel, Pablo employs means quite different from those of Miranda’s oppressors; he follows different rules of the game.

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As Arcibel's interrogator reveals, "Pablo started something like clubs in the shanty towns... gathered the street kids, taught them to sit like you are [facing the wall] and play the game.... They didn't call it Zen, but... the intelligence reports talked about a religious sect." Pablo, in other words, worked at a grassroots level to change the social imaginary, helping the common people to lovingly imagine—through Arcibel's game—a Miranda without corruption and abuse. The process was slow, but as a dying revolutionary put it, "Arcibel made us good men because he taught us to face life with dignity." Good men, the film implies, are driven to revolution by love.

Like the best of films, then, *Arcibel's Game* delivers in visually-stimulating images what the most astute cultural theorists often deliver in mentally-exhausting prose. Less exhausting than many, Charles Taylor teaches us how "a set of practices in the course of their slow development

and ramification gradually changed their meaning for people, and hence helped to constitute a new social imaginary." In the case of *Arcibel's Game*, the new social imaginary "all started with a newspaper article," as the final interrogator puts it. Significantly, the filmmakers named the newspaper for which Arcibel wrote his chess article *El Mundo* [*The World*]. For, as Taylor notes, the result of a new social imaginary can be "transformation . . . of the world." ♣

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THE HARMONICA PLAYER

He blows on a silver bird,
walking around,
thinking in circles,
not in lines like most of us.
I hear him play in the long southern night
and wonder if he is a young
and dreaming boy, or an old, tired man
shaking the house inside himself
the only way he can.

Marion Schoeberlein