

When more could have been more

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14 January 2005

The Motorcycle Diaries, directed by Walter Salles, screenplay by Jose Rivera, based on books by Ché Guevara and Alberto Granado

Executive produced by Robert Redford, *The Motorcycle Diaries*—based on Ernesto “Che” Guevara de la Serna’s memoirs of the same title (originally titled *Travel Notes*) and Alberto Granado’s book, *Travels with Che Guevara*—is a coming-of-age road film. Its strengths and weaknesses need to be considered.

The film’s Brazilian director Walter Salles, known primarily in the United States for his moving *Central Station*, was nominated for his efforts at this year’s Cannes Festival, where *The Motorcycle Diaries* won the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury and the Français Chalais Award. It also deservedly won the Technical Grand Prize for director of photography Eric Gautier. *Diaries* won the Audience Award at this year’s San Sebastian Film Festival, as well.

Salles’s sympathy is not limited to the film’s two main protagonists, Guevara and Granado, but extends to the masses of people who populate it: Argentinean, Chilean and Peruvian. True, he works in broad strokes; the working poor, who form the background for Che’s and Granado’s eventual political transformation from self-absorbed youths into socially conscious individuals, are almost passive abstractions of oppression. But he imbues them, without ever straining for cheap melodramatics, with a nobility that humanizes their struggles and stories.

Salles is to be commended for trying to capture sympathetically and poetically the ordinariness of the working poor’s quotidian lives. Despite his own vague political orientation, he reminds us that the conditions of the oppressed that Che and Granado encountered half a century ago are still with us.

The Brazilian director went to great lengths to shoot his film on location in South America. We are thus fortunate see the natural wonders, the towns and the cities that Che and Granado saw first-hand: Argentina’s Pampas and Patagonia regions; Chile’s Andean splendors; Peru’s astonishing Machu Picchu and part of Amazonia; and many towns and regions too numerous to mention. He uses them as backdrops for the social forces that will eventually begin to radicalize Che and Alberto, both young members of Argentina’s intelligentsia, as they travel up the Andes on their none-too-trusty motorcycle, “La Poderosa” (“The Mighty One”). We see what they saw, and can understand why two young men, thirsty for adventure, would fall in love with this immense continent and its natural wonders.

Also, because of the authenticity of locations, the different Spanish-speaking nationalities portrayed in the film speak Spanish with the correct accents, lending the film a certain authenticity.

Finally, we have Eric Gautier’s cinematography to be thankful for. It is truly outstanding, beautifully capturing time, place, and the magnificence, at times brutally harsh, of the land. Che and Granado are inspired by the grandeur and beauty of Peru’s Macchu Pichu, and so are we.

A filmmaker’s best intentions and technical mastery do not, however, by themselves, guarantee artistic success. The film must not only tell a compelling story, but also populate it with intriguing characters and, perhaps most important in this particular case (given that the subject of the project is Che Guevara), the audience has the right to expect a coherent

and serious *political and social* point of view.

Given Che’s history, his personality and his politics, by the time the film ends, one is left with the question, Was that all? Is *The Motorcycle Diaries*, essentially, as Salles has said elsewhere, “a story of two young men who leave on an adventurous journey throughout an unknown continent, and this journey of discovery becomes one of self-discovery as well. This is a film about the emotional and political [choices] we have to make in life. It’s also about friendship, about solidarity. Finally, it’s about finding one’s place in the world...about a young man, Che, falling in love with a continent and finding himself in it”?

The truth is that Che’s memoir, on which the film is partly based, is much more political than one would gather from the film. True, the time is the early 1950s. Che was still a young man with relatively undefined politics, but he was not the naïf portrayed with unrestrained languor by García Bernal. An otherwise terrific actor, Bernal seems to sleepwalk through his role, thus robbing the film of whatever passion it may have had. He remains bland and passive throughout; a saint whose every look and gesture presages eventual crucifixion. But Che was not the awkward, shy, self-effacing, political innocent who *passively* tries to absorb and understand the horrible social conditions he encounters.

On the contrary, by the time the 23-year-old Che left Argentina on his 1952 motorcycle trip with Granado, he was already an intellectual. A medical student three months shy of graduation, he was an avid reader well versed in Latin American poetry and literature, and also well acquainted with US literature. He had already read the works of Gandhi as well as Marx’s historical treatise, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. As with many Argentineans of his time, he was greatly influenced by anarchism and distrusted all political parties.

According to biographer Jon Lee Anderson, Ernesto Guevara de la Serna (he hadn’t become “Che” yet) was by all accounts “a daredevil throughout his youth” and “a handsome extrovert.” In fact, Anderson’s book, *Che*, shows plenty of photographs of the young man: walking on a pipeline suspended over a gorge; carousing with his male and female friends; smiling devilishly while posing in front of a bisected cadaver in medical school; enjoying car rides with his cronies; hamming it up; riding a bicycle without holding on to the bars; swimming and making silly faces with his *barra* (neighborhood gang); and plane gliding. His girlfriend at the time has said that she was attracted to his “playful, unsolemn character.” He was, by all accounts, sloppy in dress and quite informal.

The film fails to capture this aspect of Che’s personality, whose passions very much dominate the book. Moreover, as it meanders from country to country, *The Motorcycle Diaries* adopts the meditative personality embodied by García Bernal, so that it ends up being tentative, episodic, underdramatized and overly long. Toward the end, the film gathers some momentum, but by then it is too late.

One has the lasting impression that the film’s energy has been dissipated. Fortunately, the film has Argentinean actor Rodrigo de la Serna as Granado: loud, boisterous, irreverent, full of energy and passion. In other words, a perfect foil to García Bernal’s hypersensitive saint. He lends much-needed humor to the solemnity of the film.

Salles has made a serious effort, but one must be critical.

In *The Motorcycle Diaries*, Che and Granado do see poverty and oppression. They react with varied degrees of revulsion. They lend a helping hand to the oppressed.

When two copper miners—a married couple—tell their story about running away from police because of their Communist activities, Che and Granado remain impassive, almost shell-shocked. We learn nothing concrete of their struggles or what led to their persecution. They fail to move us in any way because they remain, like the oppressed encountered in the film in general, *abstractions*. Their story only serves to provoke the reactions of their listeners.

History teaches us that the ruling class in every one of these countries was at war with its own working class during the tumultuous 1950s. Peron's dictatorship in Argentina had brutally repressed the student movement, particularly in Buenos Aires's Medical School, where Che studied to become a doctor. Peronism had begun to lose the support of the working class and was turning more and more toward repressive police measures. In Chile, the president, under orders from the United States, had outlawed the Communist Party (which had helped elect him) and employed repressive measures against the working class by outlawing the unions. Peru's government had driven the social democratic APRA party, led by Haya de la Torre, underground. In Colombia, the four-year-old civil war was still raging. There were strikes and protests everywhere.

But the film makes no mention of any of this. It is almost as if Salles were pining for a nobler and simpler time when the politics of innocent youth and a generalized desire for social justice were still unsoiled by the ugliness of the class struggle, with its attendant political complexities. Che, to his credit, at least makes some references in the *Diaries* to various political struggles that were taking place in the countries he and Granado visited.

Salles's portrayal of Che as a solemn, formal, and almost beatific youth traps the director in a bland liberal humanism and does not permit him to probe into social or even psychological questions, least of all Che's own politics.

One often hears in the film and theater worlds the cliché that less is more, but this, as with all formulaic approaches to anything, but particularly to film and theatre, is only true within the specific context of overindulgence. One wishes here that the director had pushed the envelope a little more, had created more transcendent circumstances and had imbued his film with more energy. *It is an instance where less is actually less and more could actually have been more.*

An analysis of a film about an important political figure such as Che Guevara cannot examine just its aesthetics. By its very subject, the film is political. Thus, we must return once more to the all-important question of Che's politics and political transformation. At the end of *Diaries*, what exactly is going through Che's and his companion's minds? What have they learned? How have they *specifically* changed?

The director doesn't provide answers. Salles seems to rely on the fact that today's viewers are acquainted with Che's history and tragic fate: first, his role as Fidel Castro's co-leader of the Cuban Revolution in 1959; and second, but equally important, his murder just eight years later in the mountains of Bolivia at the hands of that country's military in alliance with the CIA.

Salles shows us only one prolonged scene—a birthday party thrown by a leper hospital's staff and patients to honor his birthday. Here Che gives a speech and expounds on his newly acquired pan-Americanist vision. It is taken almost verbatim from the book:

"[W]e believe, and after this journey more firmly than ever, that the division of [Latin] America into unstable and illusory nations is completely fictional. We constitute a single mestizo race, which from Mexico to the Magellan Straits bears notable ethnographical similarities. And so, in an attempt to rid myself of the weight of small-minded provincialism, I propose a toast to Peru and to a United Latin America."

Though Che may later have paid lip service to Marxism and the "proletariat," his vision never deviated much from this outlook.

There is another passage—the concluding one—from Che's book that is worth pondering:

"I, eclectic dissembler of doctrine and psychoanalyst of dogma, howling like one dispossessed, will assault the barricades or the trenches, will take my bloodstained weapon and, consumed with fury, slaughter any enemy who falls into my hands. And I see, as if a great exhaustion smothers this fresh exaltation, I see myself, immolated in the genuine revolution, the great equalizer of individual will, proclaiming the ultimate mea culpa."

One might be tempted to ask why Salles did not include this passage in the film, even as voice-over narrative. It is just as revealing as the speech in terms of Guevara's subsequent evolution, though it hardly jibes with the film's portrayal of a self-effacing saint.

Rather, it demonstrates that he was already beginning to see himself in messianic, almost Nietzschean, terms. The passage shows that Che was indeed a passionate man; more importantly, that he was, even at this early stage of his life, almost megalomaniacal, a sort of a *caudillo-in-the-making*. It is an attitude that *already* reveals the beginnings of a political orientation—guerrillaism and heroic individual action—that is the antithesis of Marxism and that was to have disastrous and tragic consequences for the Latin American working class during the 1960s and 1970s.

The Motorcycle Diaries, regardless of the intentions of its makers, plays an objective role. It is part and parcel of the recent Che revival. (A new film on the life of Che, starring Benicio del Toro, is apparently in the works.)

It is telling that the liveliest scene of *The Motorcycle Diaries* is the one in which Che declares his pan-Latin American vision—the germ of his petty-bourgeois nationalist outlook. It is here not just a matter of Salles's own views, but of a political trend that is sweeping Latin America. In Brazil, Argentina and now Uruguay, political figures who in their youth followed Che's example, entering such movements as the Montoneros and Tupamaros, today hold cabinet positions and direct the affairs of capitalist states.

At a time when many youth, including millions in the advanced capitalist countries whose populations Che so contemptuously dismissed, are being motivated by the highest ideals to make the world a better place and drawn into worldwide political struggles, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, despite its best intentions and unassailable sympathies for the oppressed, has little to say to them. Rather it promotes a myth that obscures the lessons of yesterday's defeats, while lending implicit credibility to a layer of ex-radicals who have come forward to represent the interests of Latin America's ruling elite.

Salles beatifies Che into a saint whose eventual "martyrdom" we already know. Ambrose Bierce's definition of *martyr* comes to mind: "He who travels along the path of least reluctance to a desired death."

It is a path that the Latin American and international working class must reject.



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