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# Myth in the making

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THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES. Various cinemas.

Biopics are often unwieldy films, swinging from hyperbole to mawkishness and back.

The best ones tends to focus on a particular time in their famous subject's life - a time that encapsulates both the mythology and the humanity of the person. Walter Salles's new film *The Motorcycle Diaries* does this for Ernesto "Che" Guevara, taking its title from Guevara's own travel memoir, and recreating his transformation from restless adventurer with vague notions of social justice to man of revolutionary conviction. In December 1951, two young Argentines, Alberto Granado and Ernesto Guevara Lynch -one a biochemist, the other a twenty-three-year-old medical student -set off on an eight-month journey across Latin America on a rickety 1939 Norton motorbike. The bike made it, just, across the Andes into Chile before quitting on them half way to Santiago. From there, the two men carried on via boat, plane, train, truck, and by foot, across Chile's Atacama desert, over Peru's snow-capped mountains to Cuzco and Machu Picchu, through Lima's sprawl, and down the Amazon to Colombia, then Venezuela.

Salles is aware of the ecology of Guevara's journey: that the territory through which the young men travel defines their drama as much as Guevara's testimony.

He shot *The Motor-cycle Diaries* in sequence, following the original 1952 route, using 16mm cameras and a reduced palette for production design and cinematography. The landscapes are presented without fanfare; we come upon them slowly rather than as the result of a leap of cinematic editing.

In the same spirit, Jose Rivera, who wrote the screenplay, has sought to "humanize the myth" of Che. He succeeds with the help of Granado's own account of the trip, *With Che Through South America*. Guevara, in his version, leaves out an interesting detail which Granado never forgot. La Chichina, Guevara's aristocratic girlfriend, gave Ernesto \$15 to buy her a scarf in Miami. Though most of the men's journey was spent scrounging for food, Guevara wouldn't let Granado spend the money. In the film, Rivera has Guevara give the money to a couple they meet in the Atacama desert - Communists in search of work in the Chuquicamata copper mine, without food or shelter. In reality, Guevara kept his promise, showing the resolve if not the ideals of the future guerrilla fighter, and returning to Buenos Aires from Miami with the scarf, though the romance was long over.

The film is at its most evocative in its account of the friendship between Granado and Guevara. Their shoes are filled with ease by Gael Garcia Bernal (*Amores Perros*, *Y Tu Mama Tambien*) as Guevara, and Rodrigo de la Serna as Granado. Both are exceptionally good. It would have been easy for Bernal to become overawed by the sentimental myth of Che, but he achieves the transformation of Guevara from carefree young man to nascent ruthless revolutionary with aplomb.

Granado, the more jovial of the two, experienced a political and social awakening as significant as Guevara's. De la Serna, who bears a strong resemblance to the real Granado (and is in fact Guevara's second cousin), brilliantly captures this quieter metamorphosis, his winning smile and dancing eyes gradually making room for pensive doubt.

At times the film wanders, with reason, towards the documentary. Many of the towns and regions that Guevara passed through have changed little in fifty years, and the lives of their inhabitants have improved even less. In

Cuzco, a street kid attached himself to Salles's crew -he and his friends appear briefly in the film.

At the leprosarium in the Amazon, where Granado and Guevara spent three weeks, the patients, some of whom remembered the real travellers, took part in the re-enactment. Some of these documentary moments are replayed during the film's credits, which also feature black-and-white stills of the extras -people, like the street boy, encountered along the way. By limiting the number of references to the 1950s and allowing the journey of the film crew to enter the story, Salles stays close to the spirit of discovery that imbues both memoirs.

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