

Walter Salles' *The Motorcycle Diaries*. A reflection on the origin of *Che's* revolutionary spirit

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Abstract

A discussion involving Che Guevara, in principle, necessitates a reference to his revolutionary spirit. The man behind the slogans for change is often overlooked. For this reason, director Walter Salles, may have wished to narrate Che's life before he was known as such, in his production *The Motorcycle Diaries*. This story was told in *road movie* form, on a trip throughout South America, from Argentina to the Colombian border. While the film does exhibit said genre's traits, it is also able to offer a unique version of the road story.

Key words: Road movie; Cinema, Latin American cinema; Drama; Che Guevara.

"This aimless drifting around our America with a capital A has changed me more than I thought" (Guevara, 2005, p. 26). In these words, Ernesto Guevara de la Serna described his tour of the continent, onboard his roaring motorcycle, dubbed *La Poderosa*. This is depicted both in his book, *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2005), and its adaptation, with the same name, brought to life on the big screen by Brazilian director, Walter Salles. It should be clarified that the movie's plot additionally employs the following books as references: *Mi primer viaje*, by Guevara himself (1996), and *Con el Che por sudamérica*, by Alberto Granado (2013).

The common denominator of the popular Latin American notion is that of 'Che Guevara', the leftist, revolutionary, and emblem of social struggles, who played a fundamental role in the Cuban revolution and the ideological formation and substantiation of South American guerrilla groups. It is rare, though, that Ernesto is discussed as the young doctor who departed Buenos Aires, together with his good friend, biochemist Alberto Granado, on January 4, 1952. They would tour Chile, Peru, and Colombia, and end their trip in Caracas, Venezuela on July 26, 1952. This is this story told in the movie, which facilitates the comprehension of the root of *Che's* revolutionary thinking and his devotion to social struggles, as described by his daughter, Aleida Guevara March, in the book's prologue:

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“The more I read, I learn more about young Ernesto, who left Argentina with a yearning for adventure and with dreams of personal accomplishments, who, as he discovered the reality of our continent, continued to mature as a human being and develop as a social being” (Guevara, 2005, p. 10).

The Motorcycle Diaries, without a doubt, has a profound ideological backdrop that seeks to depict Ernesto before he became *Che*. In accordance with González-Cueto (2010), it could be said that he (Guevara) was unaware of the reality of the continent and its society prior to his trip. It was during this time that he became familiar with the regional situation, his revolutionary ideas were shaped, and challenges were formulated to battle the political, economic, and social situations that he encountered in the countries through which he traveled.

When discussing a film about a person with such relevance in the Latin American political world, it is fascinating to analyze the degree of political content contained in the narration, and whether this was Walter Salles’ aim as director. It may be said, in accordance with Duno Gottberg, that the movie “...runs the risk of defrauding those who expect a more complex political approach to an individual who has long since been assimilated to the market of pop culture symbols” (2005, p. 6). Notably, there are several sequences which invite timid political reflection, and that those who do not expect this type of realist, revolutionary rhetoric may be disappointed. Of course, it should be reiterated that said sequences are quite subtle, the fruit of the director’s effort to maintain a certain distance from the protagonist’s ideals.

The Motorcycle Diaries is produced in a context in which Latin America remains immerse, despite *Che*’s revolutionary struggles, in social and historical conditions that are very similar to those he encountered on his trip around the continent. The region still struggles to rise, to establish more pluralist democracies, and extract its countries from unfounded stereotypes that have emerged over time: from the ‘underdeveloped’, ‘third-world’ label to the image of violence and danger.

It is also important to analyze and discuss a concept that has encircled cinema history and the cultural industry: the merchandizing of public figures’ stories. Today, as at the time of the movie’s production, the *Che* figure, for many, represents a Latin American hero, a symbol of struggle and socialist and revolutionary ideals. Recognition since his death has caused his images to become popular attractions that, with their reproduction in different formats, have become a symbol of economic gains. *The Motorcycle Diaries* is a clear example that one of said formats is cinema, which is never left behind when the monetary exploitation of a public, political figure is concerned. Although it is a South American film, often devalued by the great North American movie industry, the aforementioned industry trait still applies.

However, it is important to analyze the consequences of this practice for a story like that of *Che*, and working with the film format used by Salles in the movie: the fictionalization of the main character’s autobiographical texts, Or *Che*’s story, as told by the man himself, in the previously-mentioned books, adapted to a film script that must respond to the particularities of the format employed--metamorphosis from the written word to film.

Literature to film adaptations have been discussed widely. One need only consider successful series like *Harry Potter* (Columbus, 2001-2016) or *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003), which have been harshly criticized by those who read the books and then watched the respective films. Criticisms include the omission of details, character traits, and changes to the meaning of the stories. If this constitutes pure fiction, what implication would this have for movies based on literature that stems from an individual's life? Here, the complexity includes the very high risk of telling a story that is only loosely based on reality, or that has altered context.

It is precisely this that De Ferrari (2005) critiques, on affirming that Walter Salles' learnings from the revolutionary Argentine's books, were not faithfully conveyed in the movie:

With so much text written by *Che* himself, an abundance other work about him, as well as so many surviving individuals who would be willing to give testimony, many "truths" appear, which, sadly, stray, in one way or another, from the movie's *Che* (truths are naturally polymorphic and obstinate). However, one thing would be truly unforgivable: that reality be more interesting than fiction (De Ferrari, 2005, p. 152).

This discussion has its basis in the construction of the story and film script themselves. However, when the characters involved are staged and drawn up, De Ferrari must be contradicted, because if there was one aspect in which Walter Salles attempted to remain faithful to reality, it was the movie's filming locations.

The Motorcycle Diaries was shot over 84 days in 33 locations. With few exceptions, these were the same places that the protagonists had traveled 50 years prior. Alberto Granado himself was even present in some of the footage. These characteristics of the filming process demonstrate Salles' intent to make the movie as similar as possible to reality. Within the particularities of the movie's filming, in various locations, there was no acting involved from outside individuals. The inhabitants of these places participated in filming by going about their traditional routines. This allowed the actors, Gael García Bernal (Ernesto) and Rodrigo de la Serna (Alberto), to appropriate the stories in each location and share with its inhabitants, as did the travelers at the time.

It is good for the audience to see, at the movie's end, the black and white images of these locations, with the inhabitants that participated in the filming of the movie. This lends special relevance to their role in its development. Similarly, the projection of original photos from Ernesto and Alberto's trip, as the credits roll, is a resource that lends certain support to the narration, just after the story concludes.

Another notable and well-managed resource was to put the protagonist's voice to the changing scenes, offering descriptions that were quite similar to the book's original narration. This, together with the songs that combine indigenous elements, such as the use of the *cajón*, with modern elements, such as the electric guitar, was well-executed by Gustavo Santaolalla. These lend an accurate, vibrant audio tone to the film. The music's effect is reflected in the statuette that Santaolalla was awarded at the 2004 Oscars, for best original song, for *Al otro*

lado del río. This song embodied the importance of an unforgettable, transcendental scene in history, which is depicted toward the end of the film.

The visual narration management shifts the gaze toward the other shore, and the essence of this story is excellently captured in the Oscar-winning song that repeats, "I think that I've seen a light on the other side of the river...". This scene summarizes, allegorically, the character transformation on a subject laden with the sufferings of many (Moratal, Karli & Kennel, 2005, s. p.).

The film's ideal visual treatment and image composition are reflected throughout the movie, with the solemn landscapes of the South American Andes that Ernesto and Alberto traveled on *La Poderosa*. Watching them enter the flatland on their motorcycle and get progressively farther away, toward the horizon, through the area's rough terrain is a visual pleasure for the audience. An additional example of this is the characters' visit to Machu Pichu, in Peru, where the admiration that they feel for its architecture is transmitted to the audience via the camera work, which showcases its majesty.

As mentioned previously, their means of transport on their travels through these settings is *La Poderosa*, which turns out not to be as powerful as its name would imply. This rickety 1939 Norton 500 motorcycle leaves them without transport halfway through the trip. The vehicle itself becomes part of the narration, a character that plays a fundamental part in the protagonists' travels. On various occasions, thanks to the condition of the areas' roads and rider inexperience, the motorcycle leaves them, as described by Guevara in his book, "...resting comfortably in the sand before we made it out onto the flat". In less poetic words, the motorcycle bucks them to the ground.

Their vehicle is a synonym for glory when they arrive in each city, but also misfortune, when they are hard hit by their falls, and have to push the motorcycle great distances, following mechanical failure. Finally, the protagonists must abandon *La Poderosa* in the Chilean city, Los Ángeles, because it cannot be fixed. The relationship that the characters form with their motorcycle is characteristic of the movie's genre: the *road movie*. Chanan describes it thus (2016):

Of course, the mode of transport is a primary, crucial, or even decisive aspect. In the narration of any trip, the vehicle is effectively a character in and of itself, that implicitly involves the protagonists' identity. The *Easy Rider*-style motorcycle is iconic of the 60s' Western individualist counterculture. In Latin American examples, the vehicle symbolizes underdevelopment: The *Motorcycle Diaries* uses an old Norton that breaks down during the trip (Chanan, 2016, p. 182).

Similarly, Berger (2016) affirms, correctly, that "...apart from the apparently interminable roads and open spaces, above all, it is the means of transport that play primordial roles in the iconography of these movies" (p. 164). Thus, it is understood that, within the context of the *road movie* genre, the means of transport, in the particular case of this analysis, a motorcycle, is an element that conditions the progress of the events presented in the movie narrative as much as the visual sense.

Similarly, the author interprets the *road movie* within the context of the concepts of transportation and mobility, and affirms that: "...in its function of materialization of time in space, mobility facilitates the movement of the protagonists, structures the film space, and determines the visual aesthetic of the film genre" (Berger, 2016, p. 164).

The Motorcycle Diaries is a worthy representative of that which, in theory, characterizes the *road movie* genre: road trip stories that change the travelers. As mentioned previously, this trip changes Ernesto Guevara profoundly, and molds him as the social being he later becomes. The movie also adopts a hallmark for this kind of narration: the friends, in the midst of a trip, experience moments of happiness and tension, which ultimately lead to improved understanding of the meaning and value of their friendship.

This particularity in *The Motorcycle Diaries* narration is a reference to that which the same director, Walter Salles, applied in his movie *Central do Brasil* (1998), which also became a point of support for what he would later do in *On the Road* (2012). These two films take classical elements from the genre, and catapult Salles to the status of experienced director and *road movie* protagonist.

In this point of analysis, it is notable that the United States itself, the country that views *Che* with such great mistrust, is the birthplace of the genre of this film. Chanan (2016) explicitly refers to this topic and questions whether the desire of Latin American cinema to circumvent the traditions imposed by the Hollywood industry opaque a bit when making *road movies*, a genre that originated in North American cinema, in its work.

The present analysis, sought to approach the critiques and highlight the virtues of the film as an audiovisual reflection of the origin of the *Che's* revolutionary spirit, whom is depicted herein as the young Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, who travels through Latin America together with his best friend, and in his travels becomes a social being committed to the political struggles of the continent.

Similarly, that mentioned a number of times by Chanan merits reiteration: "The Motorcycle Diaries transcends the genre that it exemplifies as it moves from fiction to documentary, which registers a real encounter between the camera and reality" (2016, p. 185).

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