

**The Man, the Corpse, and the Icon in *Motorcycle Diaries*
Utopia, Pleasure, and a New Revolutionary Imagination**

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Abstract

Bringing together filmic, theoretical, popular and historical sources, the essay addresses the figure of Che Guevara as icon, myth and commercial object, as well as the significance of its representation in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: Revolutionary imagination, Che Guevara, traveling theory, iconicity, myth

And if there is any hope for America, it lies in a Revolution, and if there is any hope for a Revolution in America, it lies in getting Elvis Presley to become Che Guevara.

Phil Ochs

An eyewitness reported that upon facing his executioner in the little schoolhouse in the Bolivian highlands, 39-year-old Ernesto “Che” Guevara said, “Shoot, coward. You’re only going to kill a man.”² After he and his comrades were executed, Guevara’s body was flown to the nearby town of Vallegrande, laid out Christ-like on a deathbed in an austere laundry-room with half-opened eyes. The eerie image of his death was captured in photographs and on film. Newspapers reported that communist Revolutionary pursuits in Bolivia had come to an end. The date was October 9, 1967.

If his contribution to the Cuban Revolution had not already immortalized him, the events following Che Guevara’s death secured his mythical status in the pantheon of revolutionary heroes. A symbol of ideological resolve, tenacity, and moral conviction, the revolutionary’s body, now a corpse, became invested with immense political meaning both by those who venerated him and those who scorned him. His hands were severed in order to make a definitive identification, his face disfigured in a crude attempt to make a death mask, and the corpse, arms tied behind the back, was tossed into an unmarked grave by the Bolivian military. For Vallegrande, where these events took place, the dead Che literally became a Christ symbol and a lay saint. Buried in anonymity, his enduring presence became legendary in the Bolivian mountains. Popular culture referred to *la maldición del Che*, the Che curse, a narrative that reiterated mythic postmortem events, telling of mysterious tragedies suffered by many of the people associated with his capture and execution. It is a fact that most of those involved died within the next decade.

The novelistic account of the deaths is woven into the mythology of Che, confirming the great loss of the Argentine guerrilla hero to Latin America, and to the ideology of the Left. It is a formidable narrative of revolution, inflated

² TAIBO II, Paco Ignacio. Ernesto Guevara también conocido como el Che. México: Planeta, 1996. 729-761. Taibo’s account of the capture, execution, myth and curse are vividly and dramatically written in this text.

with heroism and idealism. The real story adds ridiculous irony to the sublime fiction. The severed hands and death mask were hidden away by a Bolivian general who admired Guevara's ideals. The CIA pursued the general until he left Bolivia to live in Cuba. Before leaving, he gave the hands—in a jar filled with formaldehyde—to a Bolivian journalist who in turn kept them hidden under his house until he was able to return them to Che's family. Thirty years later, in 1997, Guevara's remains were found buried near an airstrip in Vallegrande, and returned to his family in Cuba, where he received a state funeral in the province of Santa Clara, site of a then newly built museum and mausoleum.³ Amid celebrations to commemorate his memory, Fidel Castro symbolically declared that Che was, "fighting and winning more battles than ever."⁴ Whether brought to life by mourning, filmmaking, or commerce, the complexity of Che Guevara's "resurrection" is worthy of examination as a factor in postmodern consumerism, in which politics have become a matter of style in search of substance.

Traveling Revolutionary Texts

The chronicle of Guevara's death and his iconic status are no secret. These topics have filled the pages of at least eight books, and fueled several feature films and documentaries. Yet an evolving significance of the life and legend lies outside these media, in various strands woven around the representation of Guevara. This is seen particularly in the renewed circulation of his image and ideas surrounding the worldwide release of Walter Salles's film *Diarios de motocicleta* (*Motorcycle Diaries*, 2004). In the film, the character of Ernesto Guevara evolves in the adventure of travel.

³ RICO, Maite. GRANGE, Bertrand de la. "Operación Che". *Historia de una mentira de Estado*, February 2007, Letras Libres. Available in: <http://www.letraslibres.com/index.php?art=11819>. Accessed on: 13 June, 2009. After an extensive scientific investigation, these two journalists from the Spanish daily *El País* raised doubts that the remains found in Vallegrande in fact belonged to Che Guevara. Their report challenged forensic conclusions based on the comparison of autopsy reports made in 1967 and 1997. Aleida Guevara, daughter of Guevara, has widely denounced this claim.

⁴ ROTHER, Larry. "Cuba Buries Che, the Man, but Keeps the Myth Alive." *New York Times*, October 18, 1997. Available in: <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/18/world/cuba-buries-che-the-man-but-keeps-the-myth-alive.html>. Accessed on: 15 June, 2009.

His nascent consciousness discovers the “other” Latin America, and the gulf between disadvantaged people and the ruling system of power. Observing first the plenitude of the land and its people, Ernesto focuses on commonalities woven together, and on geography, forging new ideas about political identity. The people he encounters are marked by the violence of colonialism, authoritarian political projects, and imperialist economic adventures. There is a moral bias to his political cause that illuminates and ignites political movement. Ernesto finds power in the experience of being on the road, in knowing Latin American society and culture more deeply.

Continuously appropriated in postmodern culture, the visual representations and concepts of Che “travel” (in the fashion described by Edward Said), as new revolutionary texts conflate with previous ones. The film serves as an example of the resultant merging of the represented—Guevara—with the on-screen representative—Gael García Bernal. Both become “revolutionary” icons used by marketing and publicity machines, and by Bernal himself. The conflation conjures up a new set of political connotations for Latin American film, politics, and the historical relationship between the two. The body of Che Guevara, already invested with politics, creates a media body politic. Precedents for this process lie for example in the figures of Ghandi, the Indian bandit-turned politician Phoolan Devi, and Christ. *Diarios* brings forward the internationalist impulse of Che Guevara’s time. At work here is a process of re-articulation



Street performer in Barcelona.
Photo courtesy of Roman Baratiak.

through iconicity combined with stardom. This occurs in the realm of new global, rather than ideological, identities, and is sustained by more basic utopian impulses founded on the pleasure produced by the contradiction of Guevara's image used as pop icon.

The journey of the revolutionary texts of Ernesto "Che" Guevara and the narrative of the Cuban revolution find substance in *Diarios*—and later in Steven Soderbergh's *Che: The Argentine* (2009)—beginning with political rhetoric in the mountains of Cuba and moving through time and space to find expression today as a Che street performer donning pink silk military fatigues in Barcelona.

They form part of a constellation of political projects in Latin America that are linked intertextually and historically. Together with Latin America's other revolutionary struggles, from Mexico to Patagonia, they have become a set of powerful symbolic references, constantly deployed to define the region.

Writing about Central America, Román de la Campa argues persuasively that personal and war diaries, *testimonios* and novels, themselves beget revolutionary and insurreccional events linked in an endless self-referential revolutionary narrative.⁵ His postmodernist summary proposes an intricate web of personalities and texts that brings together Che Guevara and, among others: Emiliano Zapata, hero of the Mexican revolution; Alberto Bayo Giroud, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War; Augusto César Sandino, Nicaragua's anti-U.S. revolutionary leader in the early twentieth century; Fidel Castro, Cuba's revolutionary leader; Farabundo Martí, a revolutionary leader in El Salvador; and the members of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico. For de la Campa, both the act of revolution and the description, in different genres, have a political outcome. In this way, action and its narrative come together as the temporalities of writing and being, both containing expressive possibilities of the future. The texts reference social projects still unfinished, a just society of new individuals, in a particular form of utopian thinking. The writing continually points toward a future, giving force to the idea of potential and becoming.

Che Guevara (and the others mentioned above) left not only diaries, but also letters, producing an archival and material presence, which has

⁵ CÁMPA, Román de la. "Postmodernism and Revolution: A case Study of Central America." *Late Imperial Culture*. London: Verso, 1995. 122-126.

become the subject of multiple new expressions. Most enduring is the commercial appropriation as markets redefine the icon's ideological weight by its reproduction. This was seen, for instance, when in 1968 publishers and politicians haggled over the international rights to Guevara's Bolivian diary, which documents the experiences of his final insurrecional campaign (and which was confiscated by the military when he was captured). However, the book's ideological weight trumped any financial deal. At issue was establishing (and maintaining) the authenticity of the manuscript, which "in the wrong hands" (those of the CIA, for example) could become a tool to undermine Cuba's Revolution further. Publishing the Bolivian Diary first in Cuba and immediately thereafter in Chile, France, Spain, Mexico and Italy, and distributing thousands of free copies before its officially sanctioned publication by Bolivia, Fidel Castro's government showed its historical and political importance alongside its market value.⁶ Sidestepping trade norms in this way, Cuba controlled the diary's content and preempted what it saw as crass commercialization that characterizes the conversion of revolutionary texts into marketable commodities.

The endless linking of revolutionary texts that de la Campa investigates leads to another way of thinking about the path ideas take as they travel from one historical moment to the next. For Said, dissonance is created by the distance and manner taken by an idea as it travels from its moment of conception where, with revolutionary narratives, the insurrecional force is located, to its many iterations and appropriations.⁷ Cuba's consistent counter-role illustrates an alternative path taken by revolutionary texts across eras: in the case of Cuba and Che Guevara, the texts retain much of their original political character, the signifier still points to the signified. It has traveled some distance from its inception, but far less than Guevara's image on an Absolut vodka billboard or a bright pink "Che" cell phone sleeve. The distance covered by the time of the evolution of Che Guevara into Salles' Ernesto in *Diarios* falls somewhere between the result of the appropriation

⁶ Taibo II, "Ernesto," 752-756.

⁷ SAID, Edward. "Traveling Theory Reconsidered." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. 436-452.

by Cuba and the product of adoption by the market. The film and its texts serve then as an example of a new type of audio-visual landscape that overlay political and commercial territories. Such appropriation by media compared to commercial and political appropriation of revolutionary texts invites exploration of the mechanisms and consequences in play in order to discover their potential and their impact.

The mass circulation of the images produced by *Diarios* and the stardom of García Bernal reveals in particular the place of utopia in today's revolutionary imagination. Again, the deployment here needs to be considered in contrast to that of the Cuban state, which reflects a more ideological and social manipulation toward ideals where politics tries to evade markets even as commercial issues wield obvious influence. The Cuban government used Guevara's burial in 1997 to revive the ideals of the failing Cuban Revolution. Reeling from catastrophic economic chaos after the end of the Soviet socialist bloc, the state promulgated the notion of a resolute and invincible revolutionary project, encapsulated in the slogan "*socialismo o muerte*," even if it was harder to deny the incongruity of the utopian project with the chaotic reality and the exhaustion of the masculine image of the revolution. During the state funeral, Cubans bid farewell to Che Guevara, replenishing the political and cultural value of his image while they did so. But the Cuba of 1997, when Guevara's remains arrived in Santa Clara, would have, as the saying goes, made the revolutionary turn in his grave.

The economic downfall of the 1990s tested the extent to which the people of Cuba could endure personal sacrifice as tourism defined the new economy. The symbolic return to Cuba of the heroic guerrilla's "body" coincided with the increasing value of other Cuban bodies—those sold in prostitution, as the body was the only thing left to sell for profit. It was Che *cum* Lazarus helping to resurrect the Cuban cause, even if temporarily. Alive or dead, these revolutionary bodies gained in political and market value. Guevara's persona, which had never waned in the Cuban cultural sphere, and the historical convergence of his burial in Cuba in the midst of Cuba's greater integration into a world economy, figured as a powerful cultural icon calling back from oblivion ideas of resistance. His appeal was not only emotional but also moral and, defiant even beyond a presumed grave.

As in Vallegrande, Bolivia, Guevara's myth in Cuba was again associated with Christ but this time through an official Cuban government lens rather than motivated by popular imagination. During Pope John Paul II's visit to the island in 1998, the first papal visit to Cuba in more than forty years, the Che/Christ parallel was in full graphic display: a gigantic image of Jesus Christ was placed next to Enrique Avila's 1993 monumental sculpture of Che in Havana's Plaza of the Revolution, where a million people gathered to hear the Supreme Pontiff. Religious faith and faith in revolution were linked through enduring yet seemingly incongruous icons. The concurrence of these two images at a time of political uncertainty had a twofold value: it allowed the Cuban state to take advantage of the event's ubiquitous media coverage to present a mediated image of tolerance and socialism, and to realign the symbolism of Che with resilience. The return of Che's "body" in 1997, the Pontiff's visit in 1998, and the state's consistent reliance on revolutionary rhetoric—and its reverberation throughout the hemisphere by Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and Bolivian president Evo Morales—show a persistence in Latin America of well-traveled revolutionary ideas.

The conflation between Christ and Guevara in the juxtaposition of their images by the Cuban state has a far greater parallel in the commercial realm. The transformation of revolutionary texts and therefore political force by media into instruments of capital also produces conflation. In *Diarios*, the dead body of Guevara joins with the live body of Gael García Bernal. The fusion of the *guerrillero* and the star brings together insurrection and historical reconstruction as a weak form of politics in global film culture. Guevara propagated the grand, if now questionable, idea of Latin America as a force for Pan-American unity as hailed by earlier liberators such as Simón Bolívar or José Martí. This idea now circulates globally alongside a grandiose revolutionary imagination associated with the geopolitical "South" of heroes and revolutions, uprisings and victories. Rather than politics rooted in the socialist ideals of solidarity and equality, this conflation promotes a consumerist utopia and associated pleasures. The commercialization and media content set in motion by *Diarios* demonstrates, then, a combination of original events, their mythic evolution, and the cultures of celebrity and consumerism. The result has the appearance of a political force, since real revolutionary power has derived from the ingredients both of historical

reality and of its legends. The additional layer of consumerism, however, may drive those it captures only to the Utopia it invents, a palliative distraction from the usual darker political forces that wield real power in Latin America and internationally. The overlaying of the real revolutionary character and events with the actor and filmic narrative appears to create a global cultural force with a power borrowed from the revolutionary concepts that it adopts, but a power that diverts from its real revolutionary origins. The surface representation of and around *Diarios* substitutes for the substance it represents.

Celluloid Che and Consumer Culture

If Che's death in 1967 had signaled the end of a postulation of utopian projects worldwide, the return of his remains to Cuba meant the *guerrillero* was really dead, and utopias in the waning twentieth century therefore seemingly even more impossible to conceive. In La Higuera, the hamlet where Che was captured, authorities were determined to erase the material traces of his existence. In subsequent years, every attempt by the town's people to erect a commemorative bust of the revolutionary met with repression. For the town, the material tribute to past ideals embodied the significance of being linked to the broader project of Latin American resistance. Eventually, the military stopped destroying the memorial, and the bust of Che was allowed to stand. Did this moment of death, return, and rebirth also constitute the hero as a consumable icon rather than a revolutionary threat? Probably so, since Ernesto Guevara's political consciousness and solidarity were influenced by crucial events and thinkers of his time, including: the Bolivian revolution of 1952, which granted suffrage to indigenous people; the CIA-backed overthrow of Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz in 1954; the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62); and the extremes of the cold war represented in the nuclear stand-off of the October Missile Crisis in Cuba (1962). The final burial took place in a decidedly different, post-cold war world where Guevara's ideas, his presence, and above all the consumption of his image no longer signified a threat to imperial or capitalist projects.

It is precisely the concern that the power of the sign has diminished, that Guevara's image has been tamed, which led veteran Argentine filmmaker Fernando Birri to take up the topic in his documentary *Che: muerte de la utopia?* (*Che: Death of Utopia?* 1997). In the film, Birri weaves together his own poetry and political views while questioning the possible continuing existence of utopia as a social and philosophical construct as well as a possible site of resistance and hope of liberation. Using the "man on the street" interview strategy, Birri talks to a variety of people in disparate locations: young tourists entering a Michael Jackson concert in Germany, and at the Berlin Wall; visitors to the EuroDisney park outside Paris; dancers at the Tropicana Club in Cuba; Bolivian peasants; university students in Havana; citizens of Buenos Aires; Latin American and European intellectuals. Of them, Birri asks two questions: "Who was Che Guevara? What is utopia?" The responses vary, revealing a range of emotions and cultural knowledge, some surprisingly penetrating. In the eyes of one, Guevara "was a normal person who modeled the idea that in Cuba is known as the New Man"; for another, "an idol, a star in Latin America;" "a trouble-maker, so he [was] never appealing"; "a great idealist and romantic hero." To a young Argentine student, utopia "is defined by its own failure; failures that didn't consider human costs." To a tourist at the Berlin Wall, utopia was "Money, happiness, tolerance, better distribution of material wealth; only thinking about today."

Che: muerte de la utopia thus attempts to disengage Guevara's moribund political project from the temporal dislocation that diminishes its impact. Birri's highly nostalgic salvage operation is not to answer, but to retrieve, the traces of ideas that might once again flourish in the circularity of time. The film grapples with the reality of radical politics that haven't fared well over time while still proposing the necessity for utopian thinking in the context of a world still in need. In doing so, Birri sets loose the idea of Che from the constraints stemming from his relationship to an earlier era, reinvigorating a broader and more important space for considering the future, for asserting the force that lies behind the face on the t-shirts.

Diarios de motocicleta portrays Guevara's ideas as influenced by Marxism, the Peruvian political philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui, and the Chilean writer

Pablo Neruda; these influences are clear from Che's diaries and speeches. Yet, the actual leftist perspective developed by Guevara would go on to gain credibility and force by being rooted in Latin American political thought, and the consideration of the foreign ideological project of the Soviet Union as a strategic counterbalance to North American power. The film dwells on a simpler, less intellectual phase of political development, meeting audiences largely unengaged with politics, and presenting an individualistic, pre-political agent of hope and change.

The historical contours of the landscape lose some of their harshness as Salles frames and softens Ernesto's political formation with the lushness and beauty of the extreme topography. International mining interests drive people from their lands in the Chilean Atacama Desert, arid and unforgiving, but nevertheless captivating; the presentation of the architectural complexity of Machu Pichu matches the original diarist's appreciation of the site as a product of sophisticated ancient indigenous knowledge and culture; however, it also becomes an invented grand setting for the Guevara of *Diarios* to first articulate the possibility of armed struggle. The Pan-American worldview emphasized by the Latin American Left after the Cuban revolution proposes hemispheric and cultural unity as a political strategy against the imperialism of the North and Europe. The film invokes this encompassing view with Ernesto's journey across countries but imbues its latent political influence with the romanticism of almost any dramatized road trip. And, again, where *Diarios* captures the life-changing impact on Guevara of the leper colony in San Pablo, it also travels far from the politicization seen in the original diaries. The real Guevara's political awakening and understanding of the inequities between North and South America find workable narrative symbolization in the colony, where the worst leprosy cases are marginalized on the south bank of the river, while the hospital is found on the north bank. As articulated by Leftist intellectuals, isolation and solitude, notable attributes of the two leper communities, are hallmarks of colonizing projects; the colony also exhibits a kind of cultural awareness that is marked as a quality of strength in the revolutionary ideas that galvanized an entire hemisphere throughout most of the twentieth century. The symbolization, though, reaches beyond sympathetic emphasis and summary

when it has Ernesto swim the river. His journey blatantly bridges North and South, turning political enterprise into the melodramatic incident of the heroic crossing. *Diarios* describes a political voyage fully embracing a dramatic convention that overshadows nuanced and idiosyncratic development. In the film itself, politics disappears into the conflation of revolutionary text with consumer culture.

In *Diarios*, however, the political aspects are far more complex. Produced, directed, made, and acted by a Latin American team, for the most part in Latin America, and about a truly Latin American figure, the film represents a political act. The self-awareness of its making reflects the socialist thinking of Guevara's time, in which Leftist influence from outside Latin America had to slot into local thought and experience; Guevara served as the embodiment of the local for South America. *Diarios* could be said to be the equivalent local symbol for Latin American film, or even media, given García Bernal's personal extension of the project through different vehicles and for a range of audiences across the globe. Part of what the production and García Bernal work on, consciously or unconsciously, is a sense of remembrance for the revolutionary era. Nostalgia acknowledges the passage of time, creating distance from the original object or experience, transforming the memory into a longing. Ernesto Guevara's "life-changing" journey is at a safe distance from its historical moment and insurrectional power. Or is it? Ironically, there are more democratic socialist governments in Latin America today than during Guevara's period of insurgency, adding political currency to the now not so insurrectional force of the emblematic image of the figure. Instead, the nostalgia of *Diarios* contributes to the cultural significance of Guevara throughout the world; a cultural significance that is a safe commodity (movies, t-shirts, caps, bikinis, posters, magnets, etc.), which the narrative constrains in the film as always *becoming* politicized. Such commercialization, nevertheless, does not dilute the achievement of the larger project of *Diarios* as a political act, an intentional appropriation on the part of a tiny media subset concerned with its own identity and community.

Latin American scholar Jean Franco has rightly posited the complexity of the political Left in Latin America, suggesting that, "communist parties and

their sympathizers . . . cannot be easily fitted into the U.S. State Department's kit for profiling communists. For in addition to witnessing the indignity, not to mention the injustices, of U.S. interventions in the region, they were faced with constant abuses of power in their own countries, parodic elections, corruption and capital flight."⁸ The communist party had exerted a significant influence over intellectuals and culture in general so that the emergence of Ernesto Guevara occurs within the context of the cold war and differing positions on Marxism, either old-school or reformist, that had been debated since the 1920s and 30s.

In a sense, *Motorcycle Diaries* answers one of Birri's questions: "Who was Che Guevara?" The answer comes in the form of an early biography of the man. It is an adaptation of parts of Guevara's and Alberto Granado's personal diaries of the same journey through South America between 1951 and 1952. The telling of this part of the life story focuses on transformation. It points to the prospect of a not-yet-revolutionary Che. It is about his awakening and answering a call to action. The film lures viewers through adventure and exploration, just as Guevara and Granado were seduced by the challenges of the road. Taking dramatic liberties, the biopic expands on small events, as seen, for example, in the exaggerated heroics of the night swim across the Amazon River. The wheezing sound of an asthmatic swimming against the strong river current is set in contrast to chanting from the leper colony residents waiting on the other side. Guevara becomes their hero in a type of aggrandizement that creates a virtuous character. The real-life energy is displaced onto Granado, who is far from perfect. Critics of Salles accuse him of "selling out" to Hollywood by creating a timid perspective of Guevara. Others oppose the glorification of an authoritarian "murderer." Latin American reviewers, on the other hand, hailed the film for depicting an important historical figure, and for drawing interest to this aspect of historical record through an elegant and successful film. What *Diarios* does is reenergize the icon by adding a backstory and a body. This makes it appear three-dimensional. As opposed to setting the icon free from the limitations still exercised by a previous time, Salles defines it with a conventional narrative bound to the physicality of García Bernal.

⁸ FRANCO, Jean. *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. 60.

The icon has thus traveled from its original fixation in the *guerrillero's* body, which was perceived as a powerful threat to American interests in the region. The response by states to the insurreccional political project invested in the man was to go after the body, to secure its utter destruction. This is seen in the treatment of the hands, the mask, and the corpse. What has proven indestructible, however, is the myth. Guevara's martyrdom is premised on the perception of Guevara as an indestructible instrument of discipline and

moral certitude. The evocation of pleasure by the memory of a "good" Guevara in its connotations of strength, endurance, and ultimately immortality appears to underlie the sustained generation of Che texts from the point of burial to the ascendance of cinema's charmed revolutionary.

The resulting Che icon travels through different appropriations from a range of perspectives. Guevara's death as a physical and political reality sees the man, the corpse, and the icon defined by political accomplishments and failures.

Most of the accompanying images and symbolization, however, derive not from achievements but from the dismembered corpse, the fetish of hands, the retrieval of bones, venerated images of the revolutionary's body, his final ragged semblance, and intense gaze. These corporeal elements are symbols of revolution in Latin America. The dismembered body signaled the metaphorical fracturing and weakening of the Left; a symbolic end to the armed struggle, which preceded the bitter disappointment of the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979. Bodies

circulate as images in the popular imagination, through the arts, the press, and fashion magazines to be appropriated in consumer culture. Guevara's image now circulates also as the image of García Bernal. His description of himself as "only a man" is a counterpoint to those who wanted to destroy him. Reducing his own stature to that of an ordinary man bridged the distance between his exceptional life and that of his followers. It bestowed heroic status on the common man, echoing one of the central themes in his ideas: the common man shall make the Revolution; he shall become a *new* man. The photograph



Street poster in Bogotá, Colombia.

Photo Cristina Venegas.

of the corpse captures the striking expression of martyrdom and redemption exacerbated by the brutality of how the corpse was mutilated, hands and face, suggesting that in the hysteria of the execution there was greater fear for the dead than the living *guerrillero*. The struggle over the hands and death mask by the generals and their eventual return to Cuba by a sympathizer reiterates that bodies and images acquire different status when consumed as icons. Viewing the body as the repository of power was the utterly ignorant motivation behind the attempt to destroy it, as if this act could lead to the end of revolutionary ideas. In contrast, the reenactment by media is a conscious appropriation of the persistence of vision after the destruction of the body. This is where García Bernal's actions have potential as possible impetus for a new political force. Such potential derives from harnessing what persists, and magnifying its power with the additional ingredient of pleasure.

Embedded in celebrity culture, the literary document brings the famous person closer to its admiring public. Guevara's diaries and other texts describe the phases of development of his persona: the young man in South America, the *guerrillero* in the Sierra Maestra of Cuba, and the seasoned revolutionary in Congo and Bolivia. The documents make the experience concrete, material, inspiring, associating the image with the subjectivity of the man, his biases, and aspirations. Guevara forges a personal example of strong leadership, a quality that resonates with multiple generations. Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano attributes Guevara's greatness to this quality: "he said what he thought, and did what he preached." Whichever means Guevara used to communicate his message he transgressed by collapsing the distance between a celebrity and their public, allowing his public an atypical but authentic and appealing closeness. Typically shaped by a religious discipline based on a self-assigned moral obligation those who followed Guevara felt a strong affinity for him. His egalitarian, straightforward morality became a principal enduring attribute of the man, and a trait strongly attached to the abstract desire to carry out a utopian project.

Guevara's political resolve not only brought him closer to the people, but also made his image synonymous with the idea of revolution. Major revolutionary concepts emerged from the mid-twentieth century socialist political project that encompassed an international field of struggles. Guevara's

persona contributes to the rendering of the geopolitical “South” as a site of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial resistance, socialist triumph and failure, and capitalist and neoliberal exploitation. *Diarios* extrapolates these qualities both playfully and soberly. For instance, the “reel” Ernesto promises his girlfriend he will buy a bathing suit for her with the dollars she gave him. Instead, he gives the money to a poor Chilean couple in the Atacama Desert. This act anticipates Guevara’s real focus on the idea of sacrifice of personal gain and desires as a building block for the construction of solidarity among people. Solidarity as a social project gained strength from Guevara’s politicization of Latin American identity as part of a larger struggle; the film captures the spirit here, if not the struggle, at a key moment in *Diarios* when Ernesto pauses gracefully at an impromptu birthday celebration; in an improvised moment of gratitude, Ernesto makes a toast to the common mestizo heritage of Latin Americans from Mexico to the Straits of Magallanes and to the strength of its people. As he speaks, a reaction shot of Granado punctuates the scene with solemnity. The moment emboldens Ernesto, who moments later jumps into the currents of the Amazon, to continue the birthday celebration on the other side of the river with the other leper patients. What drives him to the other side of the river is solidarity with the most marginalized patients. Upon his departure the following day, a long, slow, and warmly lit tracking shot of the goodbye feels more like a collective farewell to the corpse that is missing from the narrative. The film brings together proto-revolutionary concepts and the pre-revolutionary Che, only anticipating the person and personality that some, but not all, of the audience knows he will become. *Diarios*, then, reenacts the incipient dreams of a middle-class medical student moved and challenged to action by his own discovery of a cruel and incongruent world lying just beyond the confines of a comfortable life. This appropriation by media cloaks Ernesto’s revolutionary appeal in the immature utopian vision of a romantic, individualistic adventure far from the puritanical imagining of regional political unity by the *guerrillero* of the original texts.

Revolutionary Chic?

According to press interviews, the filmmakers of *Diarios* stated that their intention was to make a film about a young medical student, not about politics. This seems a valid and important choice and distinction. However, it constitutes almost a disavowal of the politics that characterize older Leftists struggles. The new revolutionary politics borrows from the symbols, not the revolutionary concepts, substituting for insurrectional charge. The new generation of Latin American filmmakers thus seizes opportunities to tell the stories of their own heroes, rather than their heroes' politics.

As a commodity, Guevara's image is appropriated to signal revolutionary, chic fashion instead of political perspective. García Bernal's image, too, is associated with style. His provocative and sensuous look is the perfect conduit for pared down and expensive hip design. Bernal's fashion spreads in magazines are usually accompanied by pithy essays about his emerging global presence, his politics, and his independent-minded spirit. One piece characterizes him as an actor-activist.⁹ Converging in commerce, the two images sit uncomfortably with the underlying capitalist impulse that promotes them. While Bernal described *Déficit* (2007), his directorial debut, as a story about the inequities of social classes in Mexico, the high price tag of the clothes he modeled for *Angeleno* magazine spoke to an elite audience.¹⁰ Most of all, the popular press appears to cast García Bernal as a different type of star not only due to his status among the most famous Latin stars of his time, but because he possesses a clear sense of self. He continually avoids Hollywood, its lifestyle, and work ethic, and this entices the media to enhance his currency as a rebel, an individual thinker.

What is to be made of Guevara's famous revolutionary face stenciled on a pair of jeans? Beyond the dissonance of Leftist political ideology being portrayed and marketed through fashion and gadgets, Guevara's and García Bernal's individual

⁹ CARPENTER, Cassie. "The Face of a Revolution." In: Back Stage West, September 30-October 6, 2004. 1.

¹⁰ Angeleno. "Gael Force: Gael García Bernal Takes Hollywood by Storm," cover story, December 2004.



Che jeans. Photo Cristina Venegas.

personas also converge in the role assigned by each to Latin American culture. For Guevara, culture is political, a field for social change; for García Bernal it is personal beliefs, and home, a platform for individual achievement. Both advocate resistance to the status quo, however, thus appealing on both emotional and moral levels. Ernesto of *Diarios* and Bernal are both young men discovering the limits of their knowledge and experience. The viewer witnesses a handsome revolutionary subjectivity-in-the-making as the filmmakers offer pride in presence, position, and personal beliefs. In *Diarios*, these come wrapped in voyeuristic and affective pleasure as the viewer watches the hero encounter an astonishing landscape,

its extremes of weather, altitude, and class privilege. The journey of Ernesto's political stance reaches only the invented climactic gesture of the river crossing. Politics are really not just missing in the film; they are submerged beneath heroic iconicity and the weight of consumption of García Bernal's celebrity around the picture and the actor's life.

Diarios secured García Bernal's position, box-office clout, and global appeal. The number of Bernal magazine covers and fashion spreads indicate a high celebrity quotient. With every new film, magazines capitalize on the appetites of fans for the viscerally cool image. Even while speaking about a new role in *Babel* (González Iñárruti, 2006), only a short distance from his portrayal of Che, the aura of Guevara continues to define García Bernal's public persona. He speaks of global human rights issues and the importance of working within his own country to bring about social change. This has won him an interesting cross-platform popularity. Emerging on the international scene in *Amores Perros* (González Iñárritu, 2000), he was immediately taken up and associated with renewal, bold attitude, and beauty; a beauty that appeals to both men and women as in Pedro Almodóvar's *La mala educación* (2004). His earlier role in *Y tu mamá también* (Cuarón, 2001) had also codified this actor with a fluid sexuality. His style is messy and individual; indeed, he appears as comfortable

in a tux at the Cannes Film Festival as he does in an olive green army jacket. He has a hard masculine edge and a feminine softness. Interviews repeatedly establish his authenticity. As an actor, he states his interest in projects that relate to his sense of self and to socially relevant issues that articulate the actor as a point between the social and the personal. The fact that he only bears a slight youthful resemblance to the not-yet-Che of 1951 in *Diarios* or in the earlier *Fidel* (Atwood, 2002) appears not to be important because his presentation of himself as an artist evokes the type of discipline and conviction that resonate with the qualities of the real Che Guevara.

The power assigned to García Bernal's expressive eyes immediately recalls earlier descriptions of the martyred Che. Julia Cortés, the schoolteacher who, at age 19, spoke to Guevara when he was held captive by the Bolivian government in 1967, was interviewed by the BBC World as it marked the 2004 inauguration of *Ruta del Che*. Cortés recalled Che as "someone very attractive, with a strong presence and penetrating eyes." Alberto Korda, the Cuban photographer who captured the face in the most famous Che photograph in March of 1960, said that it was a piercing expression of rage, a look that penetrated.¹¹ At the time, *Revolución*, the magazine that Korda worked for, published a different photo. The now famous photo was first published seven years later, when Guevara died, setting it free from terrestrial anchors. While there are hundreds of photographs of Che Guevara, the resurrected 1960 image endured, becoming imbued with the political significance of an era. The famous eyes talked about by Korda and the schoolteacher retain their power in the photograph of the corpse taken by Freddy Alberto in the village laundry in Vallegrande. This image of a dead Che was later immortalized at the end of part one of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *La hora de los hornos* (*Hour of the Furnaces*, 1969), a film essay and political act typical of another era. Controversy over the use of the image of Che in death, a cadaver that stared back at viewers, led to the reediting of this portion of the film. The length of the image onscreen was shortened and re-contextualized amid

¹¹ Alberto Korda took the photograph while Che Guevara attended the funeral in Cuba for the victims of the ship *Le Coubre* that exploded in the Havana harbor in 1960.

other revolutionary figures that the filmmakers felt better represented ideas of liberation.¹² In *Diarios*, the eyes of the dead hero are transferred to García Bernal's soft, seductive, piercing, green eyes, linking them to the charisma, visceral pleasure, and emotion of the original gaze.

In *Diarios*, Che, as played by García Bernal, is honest, charming, adventurous, smart, vulnerable, and quietly sexual; the latter, a quality that stems from García Bernal's own essence as an actor rather than from Guevara's actual character—contrary to this rendering, biographies of Che Guevara point to his great sexual appetite. *Diarios* brings the cultural significance of landscape together with idealism and adventure, which make for inspiring travel companions. The journey is one of the many that Guevara made: he embarked on a second trip through South and Central America after receiving his medical degree, and then went to Cuba, Africa, and finally Bolivia. The writing style of the motorcycle journal is analytical, linking his observation of capital production and exploitation of resources to the impoverished condition of peasants and indigenous groups. His analysis compares the geopolitical relations of Latin America with the type of exploitation that occurs as a result of colonial power structures. His observations of the Inca site of Machu Pichu key onto the strategic advantages of the location for the creation of defensible positions from potential enemies, even though the structure is not a military garrison. This apparently provides license to the filmmakers for Ernesto's aforementioned fictional embrace of militarism; obviously, the development of the fighter had, in fact, already begun. The film's distortion, then, is greater than first appears since its portrayal of Guevara at this point relies more on the appealing immaturity of its star than on the intelligence and acuity of the actual author of the diaries. However, the film does document the journey as a quest for knowledge, an aspect given weight specifically in the final parting between Granado and Ernesto. García Bernal's Guevara appears to have acquired an introspective distance as expressed in his reaction to Granado's invitation to study in Caracas: he responds that there are many things he has to think about at length, but the late shift to a portrayal

¹² RUSSO, Pablo. "Santiago Álvarez, Fernando "Pino" Solanas, y La hora de los hornos: no se ha de ver más que luz." Terra en Trance, Available in: <http://tierraentrance.miradas.net/2008/11/entrevistas/lahoradeloshornos.html>. Accessed on: 14 June, 2009.

of the deliberative character of Che Guevara still leaves the balance of the film invested more in the actor than the acted.

The repeated conflation of Guevara with Bernal's own persona can be read as the manner in which a star's celebrity constitutes what Chris Rojek has called a "market of sentiments." In this case, the sentiments revolve around utopian ideals and the emotive significance of the revolutionary project.¹³ García Bernal's achieved celebrity is doubled in the representation of an already famous person. This increases consumer desire for Bernal, due not merely to his attractive characteristics but also to their association with the appealing moral principles of a hero.

Displacing the political onto the sensual ironically forms the film's most political aspect. It projects onto Bernal's softer masculinity and soulfulness the revolutionary imagination embodied by Che Guevara. This presents an opportunity to rethink Che's image of ultra-masculinity—which is reiterated in Soderbergh's *Che*—as media products transform his significance. Any doubts about the potential of García Bernal's look are easily put to rest with his portrayal of Ángel/Juan/Zahara in *La mala educación*. Here, Bernal is remarkably attractive as a transvestite. The feminization of Guevara is persuasive even when burdened by the patriarchal definitions already embedded in ideas of masculine and feminine relations. The construction of the New Man, which became Guevara's enduring crusade in Cuba, is thus built on power relations involved in gender. Alongside come contradictions of patriarchal societies, developmentalist ideas, and the moral ethics of worn-out humanism. Overlaying the malleable sexuality of Bernal may provoke renewed assessment of Guevara's means of influence, but in postmodern consumer culture it risks serving more to distract from the weight of Che Guevara as a real man—for all the ambiguity of that phrase itself.

The circulation and construction of the dramatic personalities of Gael García Bernal, the vulnerable, sexy, and smart global Latin American, and of the rough, unpolished, wildly commanding revolutionary, Ernesto Guevara, in *Diarios*, are important social integration functions. Aside from the obvious

¹³ ROJEK, Chris. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books, 2001.

connection between the two “celebrities” around the film, it is their iconic status that encourages inquiry beyond the historical record of Guevara’s life story, either as a young man or a seasoned revolutionary. Blending the reproduced, desirable image with ideas of revolution offers the pleasure of utopian longings while consuming the experience of global stardom.

But while the film focuses on Ernesto discovering an expanded set of emotions beyond the experience of his bourgeois class, the scope of his emerging enlightened perceptions is limited to notions of injustice, eschewing the broader influence of contemporary regional Leftist politics on his formation. In other words, the film positions Guevara within a narrow and romantic, more pleasurable politics as the would-be hero, replacing political depth with the physical sensuousness of García Bernal and the visceral power that this adds to the consumption of the film. Bernal’s Ernesto is so gentle as to conjure only the sweetness of a pleasant memory. It abstains from strong emotions except for principled stubbornness. Strong feelings are confined to the audience, seduced by a vulnerable hero, and enthralled by Bernal’s beauty. Franco’s poignant question about political legacies reverberates: “Why must Marxism, which had such a profound influence on generations of Latin American intellectuals, be sweetened this way?”¹⁴ The original political events and players are communicated across time and space by and through those vesting interest and becoming stakeholders in subsequent cultural dramas and markets. The rise of consumerism may provide an answer for the loss of the grit of Guevara: postmodern markets mine profit from pleasure. And yet, consuming an icon that steadfastly stood against capitalist endeavors and individualism produces real enjoyment dispersed through its multiple iterations.

García Bernal as the young Ernesto and as the star maps a geography of desire for the consumption of Latin America. Ernesto Che Guevara, the most famous Latin American in the world, is, in the words of *Back Stage* magazine, “brought down to earth by Bernal’s tender and inspiring performance.”¹⁵ When Bernal talks about playing Che he reveals a personal affinity for the

¹⁴ Franco, “Decline,” 58.

¹⁵ Carpenter, “Face,” 1.

character. “Before I played Che, I asked the spirit of Che for permission.” He then considers his own transformation, “*me conocí a mi mismo*/I learned more about myself,” echoing the movie’s simple slogan, “Let the world change you and you can change the world.” His affinity for Guevara appears genuine, and has led him to portray the revolutionary leader more than once. His first portrayal was in Showtime Network’s miniseries *Fidel*, a performance

that although critically praised, did not achieve the same notoriety. Lacking the Latin American cultural clout of the latter *Diarios*, the role was much more utilitarian. According to the actor, “The only thing it did was pay the rent and make me want to play the character again.”¹⁶ Becoming the *heroic guerrillero* has its financial upside.

In *Diarios*, revolution in acting and Revolution are joined. García Bernal is influential in his native Mexico, considered the central *cabrón* of a brash and hip new generation of celebrities who are global in their lifestyle and taste.¹⁷ The U.S. media hype alludes to revolutionary concepts associated with Guevara. He is “the face of a revolution.”¹⁸

The promotional machine behind the *Diarios* campaign certainly took advantage of the excitement integral to hints of revolution. The Mexican weekly *Proceso* says he goes against the formula of Hollywood.¹⁹ Bernal used the media hype concurrently to underscore his own views on the media market by refuting the importance of English in international films, asking calmly in a television interview: “Why should a film that takes place in Mexico be spoken in English?”²⁰ His importance at the box-office internationally is explained in *InStyle* magazine, which called him the “hottest male import,” and assessed



Cover of Back Stage magazine 2004.
Photo Cristina Venegas.

¹⁶ FEINBERG, Lexi. Available in: <http://www.joblo.com/index.php?id=5368>. Accessed on: 14 August, 2005.

¹⁷ Cabrón here is a playful use of Mexican slang to determine someone who is boldly hip and self-confident.

¹⁸ Carpenter, “Face,” 1.

¹⁹ VÉRTIZ, Columba. “The Mexican Hollywood,” *Proceso*, October 9, 2005. 50.

²⁰ The Motorcycle Diaries DVD Extras, “A Moment With Gael García Bernal -- A conversation with the red-hot star of ‘Y Tu Mamá También,’ ‘Amores Perros,’ ‘El Crimen Del Padre Amaro,’ and ‘Bad Education,’ and Tomo Uno with Gael García Bernal,” Universal Studios Home Entertainment, (2004).

his importance in terms of Free Trade Agreements.²¹ And yet García Bernal defines himself as a Latin American actor, specifically a Mexican actor from Guadalajara. He has been described for the market, as was Che Guevara, as the Latin James Dean, another instance in which the market of emotions erases ideological differences that may exist between these three obviously crucial symbols of rebellion and ambiguous sexuality. He is said to be at the forefront of a Latin American new wave of talent. *Backstage* magazine writes that, “his onscreen portrayals are viscerally hot, coolly meditative, and fiercely political, while at the same time grounded in proper talent”; he is found not to be interested in selling out, “a new breed: an acting activist!”²² Cultural location clearly plays an important part in packaging for the consumer. In the case of Bernal, this entails not only revolutionary politics, but also the presentation of the actor as a revolutionary figure, if only as a leader of the new generation of filmmaking that is transforming Latin American cinema into a more marketable industry. If the aura of revolution once defined Latin America as a political, social, and cultural project in the post–World War II era, it now serves as a promotional moniker, a citation of a symbolic imagination transformed by the market into profitable cultural capital.

New economic ventures can thus capitalize on the nostalgia of revolution and the pleasure of consuming the often contradictory association of politics and pop icons. *Diarios* exemplifies the privileging of a culture of consumerism over one of political community. As such, it represents a pragmatic response by and to a region seeking to reestablish its identity in the era of globalization. Similar motivation has led to the development of *Ruta del Che*, “Che’s Route,” a tourism venture supervised by Bolivia Care, producing cultural tourism as a trip along the key places visited by Guevara on his expedition throughout Bolivia. The local venture purports to promote economic development via local tourism, which benefits the indigenous population in the area of La Higuera. Guevara’s daughter, who lives in Cuba, gave her blessing to the Bolivia Care enterprise, which is partly financed by the British Department of

²¹ InStyle magazine quoted in Carpenter, “Face,” 1.

²² Carpenter, “Face,” 1.

International Development.²³ State investment, media, and pure commerce combine to make a very different project than *Diarios*. But “Che’s Route” exhibits the same confused mix of historic and postmodern concepts and icons as new iterations that rise or fall at the whim of the market in which politics are buried. It has yet to be seen if such projects can generate a fresh politics geared to influence beyond the market. Whatever goals it serves, the icon corners the market in persistence, propelled by the weight of its source. Guevara’s eyes even in death had a major impact despite the fact that he died physically spent, dirty, and wounded. Aware perhaps of the possibility of a reduction of political significance of Guevara’s revolutionary ideas, Cortés, the schoolteacher witness, viewed the economic endeavor with trepidation despite the speculated benefits. The irony of the Bolivian government embracing an international tourist venture around the legend of Latin America’s most famous revolutionary could not be possible without a redefinition of the political terms, a softening of language just as in *Diarios*. In this case, Che Guevara’s Bolivian campaign, once described by the military as “armed insurgency,” is transformed by the distance from its insurgent roots to become “Che’s Route” as tourism welcomes the uneasy marriage of political memory and global economics. In many ways, *Diarios de motocicleta* and *Ruta del Che* are the same product, as they both re-purpose cultural and political memory into a politically correct, capitalist enterprise. The commercial and cultural value of the Che Guevara narrative reinforces the notion of memory and place as repositories of sentiment, and redefines revolution as pleasurable within the arena of consumption. Appropriation of the narrative text, whether by the state, by commerce, or by media, produces the same result in a global consumer world. If *Diarios* and the actions and rhetoric of its star exhibit new political beginnings, these have still to be realized beyond the consumerist hype. Ultimately, the film *Diarios de motocicleta* imagines revolution as heroic gesture and journey, a chronicle of a death as a postscript in which the man is a glimmer, the corpse is absent, and the icon is everywhere.

²³ CRESPO, Luis. “Donde sólo disparen cámaras,” In: BBC Mundo.com, October 14, 2004. Available in: http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/misc/newsid_3744000/3744028.stm. Accessed on: 15 June, 2009.

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