



Landscape and Memory

• *The Motorcycle Diaries*

By Brian McClinton



LANDSCAPE and memory is a common thread that runs through two recent films. In *The Motorcycle Diaries* the landscape is the vast, beautiful expanse of South America. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* it is the internal landscape created by someone's memory. In both films (recently released on DVD and VHS), we are invited to travel on the journey of self-discovery with the main protagonists.

In 1952 Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, a 23-year-old Argentinian medical student, and his friend Alberto Granado, a postgrad in biochemistry, embarked on a 5,000 mile journey around Latin America on a spluttering 1939 Norton 500 motorbike. Their route took them across the Argentinian pampas, through the Andes into Chile, then to the Peruvian Amazon and Machu Picchu and finally to Venezuela where they part company for several years. Granado decides to stay and work in a leper colony.

And Che? Well, he was to become a revolutionary icon of the 20th century (see p27), the intellectual as man of action who became second in command of the Cuban Revolution to Fidel Castro and

who was finally murdered in the jungles of Bolivia in 1967 by local soldiers, trained, equipped and guided by the CIA. His last words were allegedly: "Shoot, coward, you're only going to kill a man".

In *The Motorcycle Diaries* we see nothing of this later revolutionary Che, but we do see much of the poverty of the land and his growing politicisation in response to it. What began for both of them as a lark becomes a process of political awakening. Guevara becomes a socialist in action, giving his money reserve to a penniless communist couple and leaving some of his asthma medicine with a dying old woman.

To mark his 24th birthday, he swims 4 kilometres across the piranha-infested Amazon from the side where the leper hospital and doctors are, to the other side where the patients are kept, as a symbolic act of uniting the two parts, after proposing a toast to 'Peru and to a United Latin America'.

Yet the real Guevara was not the secular saint depicted in the movie. He wrote in the diary: "I will be on the side of the people... I will take to the barricades and the trenches, screaming as one possessed, will stain my weapons with blood and, mad with rage, will cut the throat of any vanquished foe I encounter". The real Che clearly hated his enemies and thus became an effective killing machine, whereas the film presents

him, and Gael Garcia Bernal plays him, as a kind of shy, innocent, self-effacing Jesus figure meekly dispensing alms to the poor.

It is frankly difficult to believe that a man approaching his mid-twenties was as politically naive at the beginning of this journey as the film suggests. He may not yet have become a fully fledged Marxist but he had undoubtedly read bits of Marx and knew something about the extent of poverty on the continent. This is not to deny that the trip was a political epiphany, but it means that the *reality* of poverty and exploitation on a grand scale had a greater impact than merely reading about it in books.

Walter Salles, who also directed the superb *Central Station*, allows Guevara too easy a ride, giving us no hint of the ruthless, cold-blooded killer that the man certainly was. The closest we get is the depiction of Che's uncompromising honesty which threatens to ride roughshod over other people's feelings. We are left with a picture of an idealistic but rather passionless young man who wants to put the world to rights because it is the rational thing to do.

Bernal's flat portrayal is a feature of the film generally: it is somewhat lacking in energy and seems underdramatised. To be sure, Salles wants to maintain a sense of realism and to avoid melodrama, but we feel compelled to ask if this austerity has not been taken too far.

Perhaps the real heroes of the movie are meant to be South America and its people. Cinematographer Eric Gautier uses misty green images to depict a land of enigmatic, stunning beauty. And the people, often shown in black-and-white, are imbued with a nobility in which their essential decency and kindness shines through, despite their hardships.

As for the real Che, he has, of course, been swallowed by the myth. He died young, and he died for ideals he failed to achieve. Of such stuff are myths made. The irony is that those who still treat him as an icon have largely turned away from just about everything he believed in. His disdain for material comfort and everyday desires, for example, was far removed from the self-indulgent consumerism of modern youth.

This does not stop many of them from wallowing in adolescent revolutionary romanticism. Myths survive because people prefer them to the truth. The myth of Che survives because people do not look at his highly flawed life too closely. *The Motorcycle Diaries* - a beautiful but excessively reverential film - does not, alas, shed any light on its hero's dark corners.

