

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES

Youth, Travel and Politics in Latin America

Nadia Lie



The Motorcycle Diaries

The first monograph to examine Walter Salles' *The Motorcycle Diaries*, this book explains the significance of Salles' film with respect to the specific category of 'youth culture' as a historically and culturally situated concept.

The Motorcycle Diaries looks at the film's engagement with 'emerging adulthood', the importance of travel as a source of self-discovery, and the film's impact on the iconicity of Che Guevara, the international emblem of a restless, rebellious youth. Combining insights from transnational film studies, tourism studies and affect theory, as well as drawing on extensive historical materials, this book provides not only a necessary addition to existing scholarship on this popular movie, but also an inspiring model for the analysis of film in relation to youth culture - a burgeoning field of interest in Latin American scholarship.

It will interest any scholar in film studies, specifically transnational cinemas, global cinema, Latin American cinema, Latin American history, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, tourism studies and global politics.

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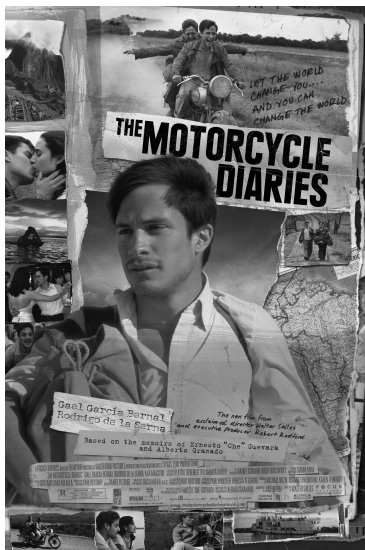
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Series Editors' Introduction

Despite the high visibility of youth films in the global media marketplace, especially since the 1980s when Conglomerate Hollywood realised that such films were not only strong box office performers but also the starting point for ancillary sales in other media markets as well as for franchise building, academic studies that focused specifically on such films were slow to materialise. Arguably, the most important factor behind academia's reluctance to engage with youth films was a (then) widespread perception within the Film and Media Studies communities that such films held little cultural value and significance, and therefore were not worthy of serious scholarly research and examination. Just like the young subjects they represented, whose interests and cultural practices have been routinely deemed transitional and transitory, so were the films that represented them perceived as fleeting and easily digestible, destined to be forgotten quickly, as soon as the next youth film arrived in cinema screens a week later.

Under these circumstances, and despite a small number of pioneering studies in the 1980s and early 1990s, the field of 'youth film studies' did not really start blossoming and attracting significant scholarly attention until the 2000s and in combination with similar developments in cognate areas such as 'girl studies.' However, because of the paucity of material in the previous decades, the majority of these new studies in the 2000s focused primarily on charting the field and therefore steered clear of long, in-depth examinations of youth films or were exemplified by edited collections that chose particular films to highlight certain issues to the detriment of others. In other words, despite providing often wonderfully rich accounts of youth cultures as these have been captured by key films, these studies could not have possibly dedicated sufficient space to engage with more than just a few key aspects of youth films.

In more recent (post-2010) years, a number of academic studies started delimiting their focus, and therefore providing more space for in-depth examinations of key types of youth films, such as slasher films and biker

films or examining youth films in particular historical periods. From that point on, it was a matter of time for the first publications that focused exclusively on key youth films from a number of perspectives to appear (*Mamma Mia! The Movie*, *Twilight* and *Dirty Dancing* are among the first films to receive this treatment). Conceived primarily as edited collections, these studies provided a multifaceted analysis of these films, focusing on such issues as the politics of representing youth, the stylistic and narrative choices that characterise these films and the extent to which they are representative of a youth cinema, the ways these films address their audiences, the ways youth audiences engage with these films, the films' industrial location and other relevant issues.

It is within this increasingly maturing and expanding academic environment that the **Cinema and Youth Cultures** volumes arrive, aiming to consolidate existing knowledge, provide new perspectives, apply innovative methodological approaches, offer sustained and in-depth analyses of key films and therefore become the 'go to' resource for students and scholars interested in theoretically informed, authoritative accounts of youth cultures in film. As editors, we have tried to be as inclusive as possible in our selection of key examples of youth films by commissioning volumes on films that span the history of cinema, including the silent film era; that portray contemporary youth cultures as well as ones associated with particular historical periods; that represent examples of mainstream and independent cinema; that originate in American cinema and the cinemas of other nations; that attracted significant critical attention and commercial success during their initial release; and that were 'rediscovered' after an unpromising initial critical reception. Together these volumes are going to advance youth film studies while also being able to offer extremely detailed examinations of films that are now considered significant contributions to cinema and our cultural life more broadly.

We hope readers will enjoy the series.

Sîan Lincoln & Yannis Tzioumakis
Cinema & Youth Cultures Series Editors

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Introduction

The Motorcycle Diaries (*Diarios de motocicleta*) (Salles, 2004) is a recent classic of Latin American cinema. Ever since its release in 2004, it has enjoyed an unabashed popularity worldwide. According to Jorge Luis Borges (1952: 151), the reason why something turns into a classic is mysterious: books win and lose audiences for unexplained reasons, he said, and their status as ‘classic’ generally implies they are not read anymore, just cited. In the case of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, however, many have watched the film at some point in their life, and they tend to remember it. Moreover, the film continues to exert a spell on contemporary viewers even though almost two decades have passed since its first release. What is it that makes this film so appealing to so many people?

Without a doubt, travel and all that it entails (a sense of freedom, a discovery of something new) has had an important share in the film’s success. Many people decided to hit the road after watching it, not only because it ultimately seems rather easy to do so – the travel is low budget and nothing much is planned – but also because travel is presented as a truly meaningful experience. Depicting a journey of several months, the film appeals to backpackers and aligns with the current interest in gap years: being off to some faraway place to shed off the cumbersome engagements, the routine and the bureaucracy and become free again. Free to live and to love. But also, free to celebrate friendship and meet interesting new people. Travel is represented here beyond the temporary ‘charging batteries’ activity of the seasonal tourist brake; it is about a life-changing experience that may grant one something invaluable and unpayable: a sense of meaning, and one’s part in it.

The way in which the journey is performed – implying risks and the lack of comfort – will particularly appeal to young people of roughly the same age as the protagonists. This film tends to exert a specific attraction to people in between adolescence and adulthood: those who are not yet burdened by family and professional obligations but are sufficiently

2 Introduction

independent from parents and relatives to be away from home on their own terms, for an extended period of time. The film does not only celebrate life, love and friendship – above all it celebrates youth. Youth as an age category, certainly, but also youth as a transnational emblem: the low-budget formula of the journey allows for a strong global appeal, beyond the North–South axis.

That said, the specific experience of travelling across Latin America, rather than any other continent, is another key to the film's success. Using cinema's ability to transpose its viewers to other parts of the world, this film can be considered a visual tourist guide to some of Latin America's most beautiful and iconic landscapes, as well as to the diversity of its culture and ethnicity. The protagonists drive through the Argentine Pampa, struggle against wind and snow in Patagonia, walk their way across the Atacama Desert, drag themselves forward on the steep mountain roads of the Andes and sail on the Amazon River. They dance with the wealthy and sit with the poor, ask questions about land ownership and share coca leaves with the descendants of the Incas. They take pictures on Machu Picchu and listen to a guide in Cuzco. *The Motorcycle Diaries* does what tourist brochures and websites can only partly achieve: draw one into a visually enticing journey and leave them with a hunger for more.

Finally, this film is about a political awakening. The historical figure of Che Guevara is the audiences' link to years of revolutionary hope, but also tragic violence and repression. These years are the 1960s and 1970s, but the film returns to the decade prior to this period, when everything was yet to begin. Providing a prequel to the well-known public life of Guevara, the film impacts on his image on a global scale, emptying out negative connotations, opening up new readings that speak to a youth whose idealism has meanwhile found new conduits: anti-globalist thinking, activism, voluntarism. For an older generation, *The Motorcycle Diaries* taps into nostalgia for pre-neoliberal times, when other political formulas still seemed viable alternatives and positive feelings (hope, solidarity) were intensely lived. For those who take offense with Che Guevara – for instance, because of his belief in armed struggle – the film offers a purified evocation of his persona as it deals with the years prior to that part of his life.

Synopsis

Although inspired by Ernesto Guevara's and Alberto Granado's historic journeys across Latin America from late December 1951 to August 1952, the film can be enjoyed as a Latin American road movie on its own terms. It takes audiences on an eight-month journey that starts in Buenos Aires and ends in Caracas, where two friends in their 20s – one called 'Mial' (for

Alberto Granado) and the other 'Fuser' (for Ernesto Guevara) – temporarily part, only to be reunited again on Cuban soil years later (as the film briefly points out towards the end). After a family farewell in Buenos Aires and a short visit to Fuser's girlfriend Chichina in Miramar, they drive across Patagonia and experience their first setbacks: their tent is blown away by the harsh wind and Fuser catches a severe cold.

The travel buddies nevertheless make it to Chile, where they need to resort to some tricks to cope with financial problems. They pose as famous 'leper experts' for a local newspaper, winning the esteem (and help) of the locals, and they develop an 'anniversary routine' to convince others to pay them a free lunch on the occasion of their supposed one-year anniversary of touring. They also experience lesser amusing things: a visit to the house of an old, dying lady deeply affects Fuser, who a few days earlier already had had to deal with a break-up letter from Chichina. As a reaction to the latter, perhaps, he accepts the advances of a Chilean woman during a dance party, but her husband catches them and Mial and Fuser need to hurry their way out. Shortly after, their motorcycle breaks down and the rest of the journey is accomplished on foot and by hitchhiking.

In the Atacama Desert, they meet a communist couple on their way to an American-owned Chilean copper mine and witness the miserable way in which these workers are treated by the supervisors. In Peru, they visit Machu Picchu and Cuzco, meet indigenous inhabitants and in Lima enjoy the hospitality of Dr. Pesce, Peru's leading leprologist at the time. He recommends that they visit San Pablo, a leper community in the Amazon. After Fuser has a serious asthma attack on the boat, they arrive safely at the community and take part in the activities (medical and otherwise).

At the end of their stay, a birthday party is organised for Fuser by the medical staff and nuns during which he gives a speech on the unity of Latin America. Immediately after, he undertakes a dangerous swim to the other shore of the Amazon River, to join the leper patients and include them, symbolically at least, in the celebration. The day after, Mial and Fuser head for Venezuela on a raft – Fuser's birthday present from the San Pablo community. They part in Caracas, where Mial has been offered a job as biochemist, and Fuser takes a return plane to Buenos Aires, with a stopover in Miami. A last shot transports us back to the time of the shooting and to Cuba, where the aged face of the real Mial (Alberto Granado) reminds the viewer of the historical dimension of the film. We learn that Alberto moved to Cuba on the invitation of his friend Fuser, who by then had become 'commander Guevara'. The closing sentences of the film mention that Guevara, after his involvement in the Cuban Revolution, went on fighting for his ideals in Congo and Bolivia, where he was killed by the military in 1967.

Names and Chapters

As indicated in this summary, the film very clearly leads to the historic figure of the real Guevara, and no doubt, some of the viewers will be drawn to *The Motorcycle Diaries* as a biopic of a famous figure that marked 20th-century history in Latin America. However, Guevara is certainly not the only ‘celebrity’ linked to this film. When *The Motorcycle Diaries* was released, the actor portraying Fuser’s role was already very well known. Mexican-born actor Gael García Bernal had already starred in two Mexican box-office hits that won international acclaim: *Love’s a Bitch/Amores perros* (Iñárritu and Arriaga, 1999) and *And Your Mother Too/Y tu mamá también* (Cuarón, 2002). His intense acting style and fluid sexuality, heightened by his later appearance as transgender in Pedro Almodóvar’s *Bad Education/La mala educación* (2004), was not only cleverly used in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, it also allowed the film to share in García Bernal’s growing international prestige. The names of the other Latin American directors for whom he had worked, and the almost simultaneous success of the other films released, created the effect of a cinematic ‘boom’, similar to what had happened in the 1960s when a new generation of highly talented Latin American novelists had come to the fore, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes.

Another star emerging out of what seemed a sudden outburst of talent was Gustavo Santaolalla, an Argentine composer and musician who had worked in Los Angeles and Mexico and who would become one of this century’s best-known film composers [winning Oscars for his compositions for *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) and *Babel* (Iñárritu, 2006)]. His musical score for *The Motorcycle Diaries*, inspired by folk music from different areas, became as famous as the film itself. Interestingly, it was not Santaolalla but Uruguayan transnational musician and composer Jorge Drexler who would win an Oscar for the music in Salles’ film. His song ‘Al otro lado del río’ [On the other side of the river] is heard during the end credits and relates to the swimming scene in the final part.

As for the film’s director, Walter Salles already was a well-known name in Latin American cinema, thanks to *Central do Brasil/Central Station* (1998), an earlier road movie that won a Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival and exemplified the revival of Brazilian cinema from the mid-1990s onwards. His exceptional position as a Brazilian transnational director with specific interest in the road movie genre was confirmed some years later, when he was invited to direct *On the Road* (2012), Kerouac’s seminal novel for the road movie genre. That said, compared to García Bernal and Santaolalla, he is the lesser-known name in this illustrious trio – a man somewhat eclipsed by the success of his own film. I will therefore start my

exploration of *The Motorcycle Diaries* by presenting Salles' multifaceted oeuvre in Chapter 1. The other chapters take their inspiration from the basic plotline: a *young* man undertakes a *journey* across Latin America and ends up *politically* awakened. Youth is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, which deal, respectively, with the notion of 'emerging adulthood', and the way in which the return to the 1950s 'rejuvenates' Che Guevara's image. Chapters 4 and 5 relate to the travel experience of the protagonist, first through a discussion of the road movie aspect of the film, and then via its relation to tourism. Politics is at stake in the last chapter, which shows how Salles' representation of bodies in the film helps him to negotiate Guevara's controversial legacy in political terms, in particular his relation to violence.

This short introduction presented the key information related to the film, the talent responsible for its success and the themes that permeate it. It is time to get the engines started and hit the road.

1 The Transnational Filmmaking of Walter Salles

In a book on youth culture and cinema, it may be useful to start a presentation of *The Motorcycle Diaries* by something which generally is overlooked: the director's own youth. The first part of this chapter provides a brief overview of Walter Salles' unusual childhood and adolescence followed by a summary of his work, which – as I will demonstrate – is diverse yet at the same time bound together by two characteristics: its transnational character and its interest in youth. After a discussion of these salient features, the chapter situates *The Motorcycle Diaries* in Salles' oeuvre at large, focusing not only on convergences, but also on some discrepancies.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

In many respects, Walter Salles seems to have been born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. He saw the light in 1956 in Rio de Janeiro as the oldest of three sons of an illustrious couple. His father, Walther Moreira Salles – whose name he inherited – was a very successful banker, diplomat and politician, who after his retirement founded the Instituto Moreira Salles, one of the most important cultural institutions in Brazil.¹ His mother, Elisinha Gonçalves, was Walther Moreira's second wife and a well-known figure in Brazil's high society – there are still pictures of her dressed by the French fashion designer Givenchy to be found online. One of the three headquarters of the Instituto Moreira Salles is the Casa de Gávea in Rio de Janeiro, a beautiful spacious house, especially constructed for the Moreira Salles family, where they not only lived but also received celebrities and politicians from Brazil and abroad. A testimony of family life in this house can be found in *Santiago* (2007) by João Moreira Salles – Walter's younger brother and a well-known documentary maker in Brazil. In this critically acclaimed film, the former butler of the family, Santiago, indirectly compares the Moreira Salles' family to glorious families of the past, such as

the art-loving De Médicis. On some evenings, there would have been over 200 people dining and dancing together at their sumptuous house.

The documentary, however, not only traces the splendour of the past but also a sadder period when the couple grew apart and silence and emptiness started to weigh on the house. Even before, their life of wealth and glamour seems to have had a negative impact on their children – their high profile implying that they were often absent or unavailable for their sons. A biography of father Walther Moreira Salles includes a chapter on family life, indicating that, for daily affection, the brothers needed to rely on each other as well as on the house maid Ema Luca ('Meminha').² As an illiterate person coming from a background very different from one of the celebrities who visited the Casa de Gávea (the Rockefellers, Christina Onassis and Alain Delon), Meminha provided the link between the cosmopolitan upper-class world of the brothers and 'ordinary people'. Both the warm and sympathetic portrayal of lower-class characters in Salles' films later on and the recurrent motif of brotherhood in these films could have been inspired by these aspects of Salles' biographical background.

Another element that also marks Walter's young years is mobility. When Brazil became a dictatorship in 1964, father Walther – who had served as Minister of Finance in the leftist government of President João Goulart (1961–1964) and feared reprisals by the military – thought it wiser for his family to move to France. For a period of four years Walter and his brothers were raised in Paris, something which seems to have shed the basis for a life-long relationship with France, and a near-native fluency in the French language. At the same time, the figure of the absent parent became even more acute in these years: Walther, the father, remained in Brazil to attend to business, joining his family only for short stays in France or during their annual holidays in Brazil.³ After the children and their mother made their final return to Brazil in 1968, the relations between the parents deteriorated and they divorced in 1976. A biographical source suggests that Walter – a teenager at the time – suffered from the growing tension between his parents.⁴ At the early age of 16 years, he took the important decision to leave home. He first moved in with his half-brother Fernando – the son of his father's first marriage – who he had grown very close to, and two years later with João Bosco, an uncle who not only opened the doors of his 50 sqm apartment to his nephew (Nassif 2019: 424), but also introduced him to the more multicultural (and particularly African) side of Brazil. Up to that point, Walter's international upbringing had acquainted him with a cosmopolitan and particularly European culture rather than a Latin American one. Yet, it would not be long before his name entered the world of contemporary Latin American cinema, turning him into one of its most important and beloved representatives.

Salles' Films: A Short Overview

Walter Salles' work in relation to film is, in fact, very multifaceted. He is not only a film director, but also a film producer, especially (but not exclusively) through Videofilmes, an independent production and distribution house he co-founded with his brother João Moreira Salles in 1987 which, through its support of several arthouse films, has succeeded in counterbalancing the more commercially oriented production houses in Brazil, such as Globofilmes (Korfmann and Kepler 2010). Moreover, his involvement in the Instituto Moreira Salles, co-directed by him and his brothers, implies that his influence stretches from the world of film to other realms of art such as photography, literature, music and visual art.⁵ In other words, he is not only a successful director but also a key cultural agent in Brazil.

At the beginning of his career, however, things were more difficult. Brazil's long military dictatorship (1964–1985) weighed heavily on freedom of expression in the country and provided little intellectual stimulus for debuting artists. It is not surprising that Walter Salles, after his studies in economics in Rio de Janeiro and his master's in Audiovisual Communication at the University of Southern California, started his career in Brazil outside of the specific domain of cinema, in television and advertising. To a certain extent, this early start would prove to be a benefit rather than a hindrance, as it made him familiar with a form of visual language that allowed Salles to attract wide audiences while also giving him the opportunity to make his first documentaries, not only for the Brazilian television, but also for the French-German television channel TV Arte. In this context, Salles delivered documentaries on Brazilian artists such as Chico Buarque and Tom Jobim, but also a short series on Japan. In a way, he was already acting as cultural mediator between Brazil and the rest of the world – a function which would continue through his feature-length films, and which he inherited, *mutatis mutandis*, from his father, who had been a diplomat.

Once Brazil returned to democracy, the situation for filmmakers paradoxically worsened. Under the influence of the Washington Consensus, and similar to what was happening in other Latin American countries at the time, a neoliberal plan of austerity was imposed on public spending in Brazil by the then president Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–1992). For Brazilian filmmakers it erased existing forms of state support overnight, both at the institutional level (Embrafilmes – the state's subsidising body for film – was closed) and the legal one (tax reduction for private funding of films was eliminated). Film production in Brazil dropped to zero. With the help of his own production house Videofilmes, Walter Salles managed to shoot *A Grand Arte/Exposure*, his first feature length film and the only Brazilian film to come out in 1991. Based on the titular novel by Brazilian

writer Rubem Fonseca, this film noir about an American photographer in Rio de Janeiro was entirely shot in English to reach an international audience but remained relatively unnoticed. Not giving in to discouragement, Salles went on to shoot *Terra estrangeira/Foreign Land* in 1995, his second feature-length film and first project in collaboration with Daniela Thomas, a Brazilian playwright with whom Salles would work more often in the future. Shot in Portuguese in stylish black and white, this film noir earned Salles critical acclaim (Cakoff 1995). It portrayed the return journey of an immigrant's son to Spain and struck a chord with a generation of young Brazilians who had become estranged from their country of birth after 20 years of dictatorship and a difficult transition to democracy. The film's title, *Foreign Land*, therefore, has a double meaning as it refers not only to Spain, but also to homeland Brazil.

Meanwhile, the new government under President Itamar Franco (1992–1995) had launched important initiatives to pull Brazilian filmmakers out of the swamp, including the introduction of the Audiovisual Law and Rouanet Law in 1993, which facilitated the return of state support. A first important success was *Carlota Joaquina, princesa do Brazil/Carlota Joaquina, Princess of Brazil* (Camurati 1993), which was watched by over a million viewers in Brazil theatres (Nagib 2007: xviii). The critical acclaim for *Foreign Land* in the festival circuit two years on added to the renewed confidence. But it was Salles' third feature film, *Central Station*, which would become the emblem of the recovery of Brazilian cinema from the mid-1990s onwards, also known as 'the Retomada' or 're-emergence' of Brazilian cinema (Pinazza 2013: 32). Entirely set in Brazil and shot in Portuguese, *Central Station* is considered as Salles' 'home-coming' to Brazil and its cinematic tradition (Sadlier 2013). The film depicts the journey of a middle-aged woman and a young boy from Rio de Janeiro to the poor region of the North-East, also known as the Sertão (the Backlands). Placing itself in dialogue with Brazil's political generation of filmmakers in the 1960s, known as 'Cinema Novo', *Central Station* revisited the iconic region of the Sertão and refigured it as a place of hopeful belonging. The film enjoyed great success in Brazil as well as abroad. It won a Golden and a Silver Bear in Berlin (respectively for 'Best Film' and 'Best Actress') and was nominated for two Academy Awards (for 'Best Foreign Language Film' and 'Best Actress in a Leading Role'). Moreover, the film helped Salles establish important international contacts, with Robert Redford's Sundance Institute subsidising the script writing, and Swiss producer Arthur Cohn providing co-financing.

These two names returned for Salles' next two films. Arthur Cohn financed his *Abril despedaçado /Behind the Sun* (2001), a magical realist film based on the titular novel by Nobel prize winner Ismael Kadare and transposed onto Brazil at the beginning of the 20th century. Robert Redford,

on the other hand, approached Salles for what would become his greatest commercial success and for which Redford himself acted as executive producer, *The Motorcycle Diaries*. Similar to *Central Station*, this film turned into an emblem, but this time not for Brazil's cinematic renewal (the film was shot in Spanish outside of Brazil's borders), but for the breakthrough of Latin America at large in the global film market. Important new directors, such as Alejandro González Iñárritu, Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, Pablo Trapero and Lucrecia Martel, had come to the fore and Walter Salles was part of that list.

Salles' international prestige was confirmed with *On the Road* (2012), a film based on the novel by Jack Kerouac published in 1957 and entirely shot in the United States. For this film, Salles worked with international stars such as Kristen Stewart and Garrett Hedlund, but also teamed up again with Gustavo Santaolalla and José Rivera, who had composed the music and authored the script of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, respectively. Simultaneously, Salles continued his collaboration with Daniela Thomas for *Linha de passe/A Brazilian Family* (2008), a feature-length film about four boys raised by a single mother, one of whom tries to make it into the world of football. With Daniela Thomas, Salles also made two short films: *O Primeiro Dia/Midnight* (1998) – part of a film project of TV Arte dedicated to the turn of the millennium – and *Loin du seizième/Far from the Sixteenth* (2006), set in Paris as part of a cinematic omnibus on the city of Paris. While the former depicts a romance between a middle-class woman and a favela outlaw character, the latter focuses on a Latin American nanny – and herself a young mother – in Paris' richest neighbourhood (the 16th arrondissement). Commenting on his collaboration with Thomas, Salles conjectured that her rather sceptical view on society to some extent counterbalances his own more optimistic take on it.⁶ Salles' own films have indeed been said to focus more on the resilience of the characters he describes and less on the depressing side of the precarious situations in which they live (Xavier 2003: 60), something which has earned him the label 'humanist' (Ruffinelli 2001: 611).

His inspiration for this 'humanist message' were, according to his own account,⁷ Frans Krajcberg and Maria do Socorro Nobre, two people he worked with in his early documentary work, *Socorro Nobre* (1995). Krajcberg is a Polish Jewish artist who migrated to Brazil. Socorro Nobre is a Brazilian woman serving a long prison sentence in the same country. The two are related through the device and motif of the letter that Socorro Nobre wrote to Krajcberg one day to thank him for his work as an artist. His sculptures – inspired by the vegetal energy of the Amazonian jungle – not only cured the artist of his traumas from the Holocaust, but also helped Socorro Nobre find a new meaning in life. The motif of the letter, and the

feelings of hope and redemption it conveys, returns in *Central Station*, in which the main character is a professional letter writer, and Socorro Nobre herself briefly appears in the opening scenes (see Figure 1.1). The insertion of ‘real-life’ figures is a frequent practice in Salles’ films and also indicates their connectedness to the genre of the documentary. As a matter of fact, Salles’ most recent work to date is a documentary on Jia Zhang Ke, a Chinese filmmaker whom Salles greatly admires, under the title *Jia Zhang Ke, a Guy from Fenyang* (2016).

As mentioned earlier, Salles’ engagement with cinema transcends his creative work. Thus, he has also worked as a director-for-hire for the horror film *Dark Water* (2005) – a remake of a Japanese film⁸ – and, through the Instituto Moreira Salles and Videofilmes, he has overseen the restoration and distribution of older films from Latin America, such as Mário Peixoto’s *Limite/Limit* (1930) and Patricio Guzmán’s *La batalla de Chile/The Battle of Chile* (1979). His work as a producer has also left an imprint on contemporary Latin American cinema. Of particular importance are *Madam Satã/Madam Satan* (Aïnouz 2002) and *Cidade de Deus/City of God* (Meirelles and Lund 2002), two other iconic films for the Retomada, both co-produced by Walter Salles. Featuring black actors in leading roles, still an exception in Brazilian cinema at the time, and combining an interest in Brazilian themes (samba singers and the favela) with an awareness of global issues (LBGTQ+ and drugs trafficking), these films introduced modernity into conventional film language in Brazilian cinema⁹ and replaced the victimist portrayals of marginalised characters with a more ambivalent one. In *City of God*, the protagonist ultimately succeeds in leaving the favela, thanks to his work as photographer; in *Madam Satan*, the main character (based on a historical person) ends up dancing as a drag queen at the Brazilian carnival, which was his personal dream.



Figure 1.1 Socorro Nobre appears in the opening scenes of *Central Station*

Transnationality

Walter Salles has been presented as ‘Brazil’s most exportable contemporary filmmaker’ (Pinazza and Bayman 2013: 6). His ability to reach both a Brazilian and an international audience has turned him into a prime example of ‘a transnational director’ (Shaw 2013: 27), a filmmaker experienced in cross-border collaboration and having a particular talent for endowing an international film language with ‘local’ accents and concerns. The fact that his films have been shot in different languages (English, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese) and have been produced by crews and artists from different countries is perhaps the most direct proof of this transnational character. Of course, Latin American cinema, much like cinemas in the rest of the world, has had a strong international dimension from its beginning, with tango dancer Carlos Gardel fascinating viewers from the days of the silent cinema onwards, Carmen Miranda’s image as ‘Brazilian bombshell’ with her signature fruit hat travelling the world and songs like ‘Allá en el rancho grande’/‘Over there at the Rancho Grande’ becoming international hits.

However, after the commercial successes of the 1940s and 1950s, during which countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Argentina developed their own national film industries but with a highly exportable product, a reaction set in during the 1960s and 1970s, which became known as the ‘New Latin American Cinema’ and included the Cinema Novo-movement referred to earlier. Inspired by the Cuban Revolution, this movement strived for a new kind of cinema that would reject the formulas of US cinema (identified with entertainment only) as well as European cinema (identified with ‘art’ cinema). The aspiration was to design a typically Latin American cinema through ‘an aesthetics of hunger’¹⁰ – an artistic programme based on the possibility of converting the poor conditions of filmmaking in Latin America into a source of creativity and critical reflection on poverty and underdevelopment as consequences of systemic injustice. In reality, several of its main representatives (such as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Glauber Rocha) had studied in Europe and were influenced by Italian neorealism – a movement that encouraged filmmakers to take their cameras into the street and work with non-professional actors instead of stars. But in Latin America’s 1960s the emphasis was on the need to break free from earlier models and establish a cinema of one’s own, rather than on foregrounding any links to earlier trends.

Seen in this light, the notion of ‘transnational cinema’ implies a partial relativisation of the politicised strand of Latin American cinema that came about in the 1960s and 1970s and which forcefully rejected industrial forms of filmmaking (particularly the ones of Hollywood) for ideological reasons. Instead, transnational cinema uses procedures of both commercial and

political cinema: an interest in Latin American society and social issues, on the one hand, and an internationally inflected film language to make such issues ‘exportable’ to other countries, on the other. Such a combination has sometimes aroused criticisms against the allegedly depoliticised look of these directors in comparison with their predecessors. In Brazil, for instance, representatives of the Retomada have been accused of replacing the ‘aesthetics of hunger’ of the 1960s generation with a ‘cosmetics of hunger’ (Bentes 2001), marked by flawed and rather glossy pictures of places that had been iconic of political protest, such as the Sertão and the favela. Equally, Mexican transnational directors have been held responsible for a strategic recycling of the revolutionary zeal of the 1960s generation under the form of lighter, ‘leftist’ messages, more suitable for global circulation (Shaw 2015). The political dimension of transnational films constitutes an important question, then, and also applies to *The Motorcycle Diaries* – a film not only made by a transnational director, but also one that engages with a revolutionary hero’s youth. As I will return to this question in the last chapter of this book, for now it suffices to say that Salles himself has alleged a more general change in politics to explain the differences between the former generation and his own. Referring to Brazilian films released after the mid-1990s, he stated: ‘They are as harsh and essential in their form and content as the films made by the generations of the 1960s and 1970s. They are also different, since they portray another political and social moment’ (Salles 2003: xiv).

In spite of such differences, the influence of the New Latin American Cinema on Salles’ own work is undeniable. Several of his films implicitly pay tribute to the work of members of this generation. Thus, *Central Station* symbolically inverts the journey by rural migrants to the city, as already depicted in *Vidas secas/Barren Lives* (1963) by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, and *The Motorcycle diaries* itself contains several allusions to *El viaje/The Voyage* (1994) by Fernando Solanas – another key director of the New Latin American Cinema (see Chapter 4). In a more general way, the depiction of characters living in precarious situations and the regular inclusion of documentary footage to connect fiction and reality clearly relate Salles’ work to this previous cinema movement. Furthermore, the director’s ‘humanist’ take on reality also resonates, in some ways, with the ultimately hopeful and optimistic spirit that had animated the 1960s generation of directors. The most important element which Salles inherited from the New Latin American Cinema, however, is the idea that Latin America itself could be a valuable source of inspiration for filmmakers. An iconic film of the New Latin American Cinema movement, *Memorias del subdesarrollo/Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) by Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea was crucial to this awareness.

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Having spent part of my childhood in Europe, I had a better knowledge of Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave than I did of cinematic currents in Latin America. [...] But *Memorias del subdesarrollo* carried with it something more. A point of view that was vigorous, original and, more importantly, pertained directly to us, Latin Americans.

(Salles 2003: xiii)

Salles oversaw a release of this film on DVD with personal audio commentary.

Salles is then clearly a Latin American film director, but one who, unlike his politicised predecessors from the 1960s, does not shy away from the cinemas of other continents. Indeed, transnational directors from Latin America reject the neat distinction which the previous generation had made between ‘their’ cinema and the ones of their European and US colleagues. In a parallel way, the cinema industry at large opened up to more multicultural expressions of identity, which favoured the breakthrough of directors like Salles (Nagib 2007: xviii–xix). In this context, one of Salles’ specific trademarks became his interest in the genre of the road movie and his imaginative way of engaging with it – a characteristic that I will explore in Chapter 4 of this book. Suffice it to say, for now, that movement and mobility convey strong socio-political meanings in Salles’ work (especially when they establish a dialogue with issues related to migration) while also fundamentally connecting to wandering, which has emerged as a pervasive theme throughout the filmmaker’s oeuvre. In his own words:

It is true that somehow all of my films are about wandering, and this involves two evident consequences: firstly, the idea of loss, for all running forward necessarily involves some loss; and secondly, the possibility of finding people, the possibility of change. (Salles, quoted in Elena 2003: 215)

Youth

Change is also what marks Salles’ interest in youth. This aspect of the filmmaker’s work has remained virtually unexplored, yet an interest in youth is a salient characteristic of his films. With the exception of *Exposure*, the lead roles in all of his films are given to children, teenagers or post-adolescents. Paco, in *Foreign Land*, has just started his studies in university. Joshué, in *Central Station*, is a 9-year-old boy. Ernesto Guevara still has to finish his university studies in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and the same goes for Sal Paradise in *On the Road*. The protagonists of *Behind the Sun* are, respectively, 9 and 20 years of age. In *A Brazilian Family*, three of the

boys are teenagers and one is still in primary school. Interestingly, none of these young persons is a girl, something which possibly reflects Salles' own upbringing in a family of brothers only.

Salles' take on youth can be summarised in three motifs. The first is the one of the young boy invigorating older persons through his positive outlook on life. One finds this figure in *Central Station* and *Behind the Sun*. In the first film, Josué helps Dora – the middle-aged woman who accompanies him on his journey – overcome her cynical attitude towards life. In *Behind the Sun*, a young boy inspires his older brother to prefer life (and love) over a code of honour that obliges him to kill and be killed. It is important to stress that, for Salles, this hopeful take on youth implied moving away from previous depictions of children as victims of miserable living conditions and/or young delinquents. Thus, when asked if *Central Station* was influenced by Héctor Babenco's film *Pixote /Small Kid* (1981), an earlier well-known Brazilian film on a young boy growing up in conditions of delinquency and abandonment, Salles answered:

I liked *Pixote* very much, but the two films are very different and were made at very different moments in time. *Pixote* is a film about a destruction, it is about the crumbling of the possibilities of childhood in 1970s Brazil; *Central do Brasil*, on the contrary, shows the possibility of a redemption, [...] of discovering affection.

(Salles 1998: 20)

Children are, in this sense, essential to the humanist Salles; they symbolise hope in a society that has become cynical.

The second motif on youth is the one of the adolescent who needs to transition into adulthood but finds himself caught in-between. This figure appears in *Foreign Land*, where Paco's journey to Spain is also a search for origins; in *Behind the Sun*, where the older brother has to break free from his father's authority; in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, where the protagonists are in search of their own vocation; and in *A Brazilian Family* where the 17-year-old protagonist continuously shifts between hope and disillusionment as he attempts to make it into the world of football. As for *On the Road*, all characters belong to this age group, and the main prism through which we follow them is the one of a character based on Jack Kerouac himself, struggling to become a writer. Wondering what one will become, working towards it or against it, or not having a clue and feeling lost, those are the feelings that accompany this specific stage in life that Chapter 2 will refer to as 'emerging adulthood'. What seems to interest Salles most in this figure is that the emerging adult is in a process of transformation, of change, of self-discovery, the outcome not yet being given. In fact, it is the description

of this process which also ignited Salles' admiration for Jiá Zhang Ke, as the director himself asserted (Film at Lincoln Centre 2016). Indeed, the first two films of the Chinese director focus precisely on the difficult transition from youth into adulthood (*Pickpocket* [1997] and *Platform* [2000]).

A third and final motif is the one of brotherhood, explicitly present in *Central Station*, *Behind the Sun* and *A Brazilian Family*. Brotherhood generally operates as a critique on failing parenthood, either because the parents are absent (*Central Station*, the fathers in *A Brazilian Family*) or because they are oppressive (the father in *Behind the Sun*). In this context, the notion of brotherhood challenges the one of the family and posits the possibility of imagining communities in an alternative way, one marked by horizontality and mutual solidarity. In turn, this idea can be expanded into one of friendship, which also appears throughout Salles' oeuvre. It is part of the attraction of the road movie genre, characterised by the motif of 'buddies', provides the dynamic in *On the Road* (a book on the friendship between Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassidy) and explains the interest in the letter as a way of establishing relationships between people (see the epistolary friendship between Socorro Nobre and Krajcberg). Brotherhood and friendship are figurations of alternative communities, expressions of a 'we' that complements the search for an 'I' in the young adult.

The importance and richness of the motif of youth in Salles' oeuvre should be related, in a more general way, to the one of cultural identity. The figure of the absent father (or mother) so prominent in Salles' films also applies, symbolically, to Brazil as a 'fatherless' country, one that was abandoned by colonisers after centuries of exploitation and that still needs to find out how it can survive and grow on its own terms. In this respect, *Central do Brasil*, officially translated as *Central Station* but literally *Centre of Brazil*, not only refers to the railway station in Rio de Janeiro where the protagonists meet for the first time but also to the ongoing search for 'the centre' or core of Brazil's own identity. As Salles himself asserts:

Cinema is, first and foremost, the projection of a cultural identity which comes to life on the screen. It mirrors, or should mirror, this identity. But that is not all. It should also 'dream' it or make it flesh and blood, with all its contradictions. Unlike Europe, we are societies in which the question of identity has not yet crystallised. It is perhaps for this reason that we have such a need for cinema, so that we can see ourselves in the many conflicting mirrors that reflect us.

(Salles 2003: xv)

It is perhaps for this reason as well that Salles so prominently foregrounds the question of youth, as the period in life when the question of identity is most acute.

***The Motorcycle Diaries* in Relation to Salles' Other Films**

As indicated throughout this chapter, *The Motorcycle Diaries* neatly fits in this overall portrayal of Salles' work. One could even say that the salient characteristics mentioned apply to it in a more acute form than to any other of his films. Shot by a Brazilian director and dedicated to an Argentine hero who is interpreted by a Mexican actor, *The Motorcycle Diaries* is unmistakably a transnational film. Contrary to other films by Salles, it also mirrors this condition at the level of the story itself, which – as I will argue – brings the message that borders are ultimately relative. Moreover, the film ranks as the most well-known road movie from Latin America, a prominent genre in the new transnational filmmaking in the continent. Foregrounding the motorcycle as iconic vehicle, the very title of the film appeals to road movie enthusiasts, and the journey itself provides 90% of the narrative material of its story. Finally, the film focuses on a young man who changes throughout the film and is aware of it: 'I no longer am the person I was', he says in the end, underscoring the changeability of youth itself.

At the same time, *The Motorcycle Diaries* stands out in Salles' oeuvre because of a series of features that grant it a degree of singularity. The first one is its impressive success in the global market. Although several of Salles' films have received wide acclaim, nothing beats *The Motorcycle Diaries* in this respect. The film garnered over 30 awards worldwide, including an Oscar for 'Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures, Original Song', and reached a global theatrical box office of \$57.6 million, which turned it into the most profitable of all Latin American films at the time (Alvaray 2008: 49). Several transnational funding organisations contributed to this success. As Sophia McClennen recalls:

The film was produced by a multinational array of sources including British Film4, Robert Redford's Wildwood Enterprises and Argentine BD Cine, as well as production companies based in Peru, Chile and Germany. It was distributed by Universal Pictures via its 'indie' arm Focus Features. And yet, in Argentina it was distributed by Disney-owned Buena Vista Pictures.

(McClennen 2018: 58)

Another factor in this success was (and continues to be) the presence of Gael García Bernal in the lead role. Having a clearly global appeal, thanks to international hits like *Love's a Bitch*, *Babel*, and *La mala educación/Bad Education*, García Bernal moreover exemplifies a new kind of star, the so-called star-as-performer: 'In this category attention is deliberately drawn to the work of acting, so that, in a reversal of the celebrity category,

it is performance and work that are emphasised, not leisure and the private sphere' (Kearley 2013: 36).

This work includes not only García Bernal's cinematic appearances – marked by an intense acting style – but also his public persona as an activist for human rights. Together with fellow-actor Diego Luna, García Bernal founded the production house Canana, which endorses film projects and documentaries related to social issues, and he spoke out publicly in defence of undocumented migrants at the Oscar ceremony in 2017. Although García Bernal's activities in this field only became prominent after the release of Salles' film, it is likely that the film's continued appeal in a global context benefits from its association with such a high-profile actor, and vice versa. As Dolores Tierney put it:

That Bernal is a transnational social actor, committed to social causes and political action, gives his role as Guevara an even greater resonance, and in moments like these [the improvised ones] a sense that as a person he, too, is invested in what ordinary people are telling him about their lives.

(2019: 301)

A second reason why this film stands somewhat apart in Salles' oeuvre is because of its language and its subject. It is Salles' only Spanish-language film, and the only one to be based on a historic character. True, one of the films which the Brazilian director co-produced, *Madam Satan*, also provides some kind of 'prequel' to the public life of a historic character – in that case, João Francisco dos Santos (1900-76), a Brazilian samba-dancer and transvestite – but the challenge was undoubtedly greater when dealing with Ernesto Guevara, a name with almost universal resonance and someone who had devoted his life to the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. There is then a specific irony in the fact that precisely such a successful film by Salles is dedicated to precisely this historic figure. The tension between 'commerce' and 'politics' refers back to the days of the New Latin American Cinema movement, when directors shied away from Hollywood magnates to preserve their ideological purity. After that period, new generations of filmmakers came to the fore, and new aesthetics – often more 'accessible' than the experimentalism of their predecessors – appeared. However, according to Sophia McClennen (2018: 62), scholarship on Latin American cinema often remained stuck in the 1960s and 1970s, reducing any notion of 'political cinema' to the one that had been put forward by the New Latin American Cinema. As a consequence, the political dimension of a film like *The Motorcycle Diaries* has aroused criticisms, and concepts like 'issuetainment' (Hulme-Lippert 2016: 106) and even 'revolutionary

porn' (McClennen 2018: 58) have been coined to reject the new association between commerce and politics, which *The Motorcycle Diaries* and other films in this vein deploy. I will come back to this in the last chapter of this book. For now, it can be noted that this more general debate on the relation between aesthetics and commerce in Latin American cinema is particularly acute in the case of this very successful film on a man who fought the very system that ensured this success.

At the same time, it is important to stress that, even as a 'box office' hit, *The Motorcycle Diaries* exemplifies a new kind of genre in transnational Latin American filmmaking for which scholars have proposed the labels 'prestige blockbuster' (Smith 2012: 72) or 'commercial art cinema' (Shaw 2015: 27). Indeed, while applying strategies from mainstream cinema, such works simultaneously maintain an auteurist signature, for instance through the use of a specific style, colour-palette or vernacular technique. Their commercial success is therefore also matched by an artistic acclaim, which centres, for instance, on the film's style or use of vernacular 'accents' in the universally recognisable film language which these directors also draw upon. Not only the use of Spanish – instead of English – but also the inclusion of documentary footage and winks at Latin America's film history and photography make sure that *The Motorcycle Diaries* cannot be identified with the average blockbuster. A proof of this 'mixed' nature can be found in the fact that the film was not only screened in larger cinemas but also included by streaming sites directed at a more select, cinephile audience, such as MUBI. Because of its profile as 'prestige blockbuster', *The Motorcycle Diaries* differs from other films by Salles, like *Foreign Land* or *A Brazilian Family*, which rather belong to yet another genre of transnational filmmaking: the Latin American iteration of the festival film. Though there exists much discrepancy regarding this term, one can say that 'festival films' are mainly distributed through the festival circuit (or associated streaming platforms), tend to use an experimental style and avoid typically commercial strategies such as featuring stars and drawing upon (a conventional notion of) genres.

Finally, *The Motorcycle Diaries* differs from Salles' other films because of the fact that its protagonists do not come from the disenfranchised part of society, but belong to an upper echelon of Latin America's middle class. Though there is no comparison between the conditions in which Ernesto Guevara grew up in the 1950s, and the ones in which Walter Salles himself was raised as member of one of the wealthiest families of Brazil, the fact that this film deals with the discovery of socio-economic otherness inevitably resonates with Salles' own position as a socially committed filmmaker who grew up in privileged circumstances. Looking at those who are different from us, and who do not have the means to make their voices heard

and their faces seen is what his filmic oeuvre attempts to do. In this, the humanist Salles meets the former revolutionary hero. The rest of this book is devoted to that encounter.

General Note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Portuguese and Spanish language source are the author's.

Notes

- 1 See the institute's website for more information: <https://ims.com.br/en/about-ims/>.
- 2 As stated in the biography, 'The brothers compensated the absence of their parents by becoming very close to one another. One protected the other, and Meminha, who showed an incredible love and tenderness, became the central figure in their lives, around whom the brothers were able to bond. It was through her that the brothers learned to love each other' (Nassif 2019: 423).
- 3 Family footage of their annual vacations in Brazil is included in another documentary of João Moreira Salles, *No intenso agora [In the Intense Now]* (2017).
- 4 As the same biography of his father put it, 'At the age of 16, he [Walter] felt how the tension [between his parents] increased and he refused to be a witness to the agony of their marriage' (Nassif 2019: 424).
- 5 It is useful to mention, in this context, that Walter Salles is married to Maria Klabin, a Brazilian painter.
- 6 As Salles put it in an interview, 'I'm fond of co-directing every four or five films in order to remind me that this [filmmaking] is a collective endeavour before anything else and that there is more than one way to put the camera or to narrate a specific scene. That kind of encounter but also collision of points of view is really something desirable, I think. I have perhaps a more optimistic or a more ... I wouldn't say romantic but redemptive perception of the world and I think that Daniela brings a kind of healthy scepticism [...]. During the shooting process itself we have really fascinating discussions [...] The material becomes extremely alive and the process becomes even more collective than what I tried to do' (Walter Salles interviewed by Ruben Nolllet, on DVD *Linha de passe [A Brazilian Family]*, 2009: 14:00-17:00).
- 7 See, for instance, the following comment by Salles on Krajcberg: 'It was he who gave me my North, a point of orientation, who allowed me to understand who I was and how I could best express myself and the areas which I preferred. We made a documentary together: *Socorro Nobre*. There is a before and an after this one. As we were born on the same day in April, I consider him as one of my brothers, but the newest one. The newest one because he is the most radical of all of us' (quoted in Leão 2009). On Socorro Nobre, see Salles (1998: 7-8).
- 8 The Japanese film was also entitled *Dark Water* – in Japanese – and was directed by Hideo Nakata in 2002.
- 9 A well-known illustration of this is Benny's goodbye party in *City of God*, during which a crowd of favela characters dance to disco music.
- 10 This expression was introduced in 1965 by Glauber Rocha, one of the movement's most important representatives in Brazil.

2 Narratives of Formation in Latin America

Are the characters of *The Motorcycle Diaries* young? Ernesto Guevara is 23 years of age. His friend, Alberto Granada, is 29 years old. They are certainly not adolescents anymore, young people whose bodies are undergoing changes and who are in high school. Nor are they adults yet, as the use of their playful nicknames throughout the film, 'Fuser' and 'Mial', subtly suggests.¹ In the opening scenes, Ernesto is depicted amidst his brothers and sisters, the oldest son of a father who wants him to finish his studies first. Alberto has graduated as a biochemist but has not yet found himself a steady job. The journey across Latin America is Alberto's life-long dream and completing it before he turns 30 is a goal he explicitly sets in order to 'motivate' Ernesto – a 'false' goal as it turns out in the end (Alberto's birthday is not in April but in August), but a goal still. What is important here, rather than the factual data, is that the very reference to the birthday (which will return at other moments in the story) indicates that age matters in this film (more than in the historic diaries), and that it carries a symbolic meaning. Indeed, there is no fundamental reason why one would not be able to make a long journey after 30 – many people do – but in the film, this age symbolises the end of youth as a period of freedom: freedom from professional obligations (no fixed working hours yet nor short holidays) as well as from social obligations (no children to take care of nor life partner to take into account); freedom also from financial concerns, as there are still parents to rely on, if needed; freedom, finally, from physical preoccupations, for the body is still healthy and fit. Being off on a motorcycle for several months is a way to enjoy this freedom; the freedom of youth itself.

Post-Adolescence versus Emerging Adulthood

Traditionally, youth has been defined as the stage between childhood and adulthood. For a long time, this was considered to be the period of 'adolescence', and it was supposed to end somewhere around 20.² The protagonists

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are older than 20, though, and will be considered by some as ‘post-adolescents’. In psychoanalysis, in particular, it has become common to refer to the period between 18 and 30 years of age as a later stage of adolescence, the latter being considered as a period marked by the idea of a crisis.³ During the teenage years, a crisis emerges due to the traumatic experience of a body undergoing changes, and escapist behaviour constitutes a reaction to this biological reality. Towards the end of adolescence, by contrast, the pressure to insert oneself in reality again (through a job and stable relationships) produces a new crisis caused by a new challenge: ‘to accept and submit to the reality principle and commit oneself to a particular domain in life’ (Fejtő 2013: 351 author’s translation). The urgency which the protagonists of *The Motorcycle Diaries* – and particularly Mial – feel to make a long journey is related to this idea that reality is knocking on their door: they should get settled, find a job, marry and start a family, and so Mial decides to give it one last shot and take his buddy along. In this respect, ‘post-adolescence’ presents itself in Salles’ film under a happier image, one that resonates with the following upbeat definition of an online Urban dictionary:

The time in life when you awaken from adolescence, usually about the age of 19 to 25. You may still have a headache from your teenage kicks of the past, but in whole you are pretty lucky to become a real man or woman. It may be the coolest time because you realise that you now are a twenty-something (a sex machine in a cool outfit) and the opposite of a teenager (a whimpy wannabe) [...] *As long as you are in high-school you can't see that there is a life after this twilight zone ... but hell yeah there is! Wait until your post-adolescence* (Post-adolescence 2008).

In this book, however, I prefer to adopt the term ‘emerging adulthood’ as the one that Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2015) introduced for this period of life. Arnett holds that the word ‘post-adolescence’ does not do justice to the fact that the stage in life referred to presents characteristics of its own, which make it really distinct from other episodes in our life cycle.

[Emerging adulthood] is very different from adolescence – much freer from parental control, much more a period of independent exploration. Nor is it really ‘young adulthood’, since this term implies that an early stage of adulthood has been reached, whereas most young people in their twenties have not made the transitions historically associated with adult status – especially marriage and parenthood – and most of them feel they have not yet reached adulthood. It is a new and historically unprecedented stage of the life course, so it requires a new term and a

new way of thinking. I have proposed that we call it *emerging adulthood*. (Arnett 2015: 2)

This period in life is marked by certain characteristics, particularly ‘identity-explorations, feeling “in-between,” and self-focus’ (Tanner and Arnett 2017: 34). These clearly appear in *The Motorcycle Diaries* – a film that ends with the protagonist’s acknowledgement that he no longer is the person he used to be before the journey. As in-between characters, Ernesto and his buddy are sometimes playful as children and teenagers (sports, flirting, tricks), at other times serious and professional as adults (treating patients in the leper community). As for the self-focus, this is ensured through the narrative voice of Ernesto, reflecting on the events by way of letters to his mother.

The most important reason why I prefer the term ‘emerging adulthood’, however, is that it does not depict this period as one that stops with adult life nor as being ‘threatened’ by it in any sort of way. Instead, it presents it as a formative period in life that potentially influences all other stages. Jennifer Lynn Tanner, in particular, has stressed that emerging adulthood is ‘a critical turning point in life span human development’ (2006: 21). As she explains in a more recent co-authored contribution on the subject, during emerging adulthood ““marker life events” are most likely to occur [and] there is stronger potential for personality change compared to earlier and later decades’ (Tanner and Arnett 2017: 36, 37). Indeed, this is how Salles’ film presents Guevara’s historic journey. Rather than as some prolonged vacation that allows the protagonists to enjoy freedom and postpone adulthood, the continental trip appears as an experience that will mark the rest of Ernesto’s life and it will do so in an even more profound way than is normally thought of. For the journey will not only impact Ernesto’s future life in terms of profession or marital status. It will determine more fundamentally who he will become: Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, the revolutionary. To put it in other words, emerging adulthood, as a period of ‘life marking events’, is about something more profound than career choices. It is about a person’s inner vocation, the meaning one will give to their own life. It is also the period in which this becomes clear to them.

The Bildungsroman

As a film depicting a process of inner growth, *The Motorcycle Diaries* is an example of a coming-of-age film. This genre belongs to an older tradition of narratives of formation, identified as Bildungsroman (Fox 2017: 5). Focusing on Salles’ film as related to the Bildungsroman will not only allow the reader to inscribe the film in the wider narrative of Che’s life (which I

will do in Chapter 3), but also situate *The Motorcycle Diaries* with respect to a specifically Latin American variant of the genre.

Let us first take a look at the classic definition of the Bildungsroman:

In a typical ‘Bildungsroman’ we are shown the development of an intelligent and open-minded young man in a complex, modern society without generally accepted values; he gradually comes to decide, through the influence of friends, teachers and chance acquaintances as well as the ripening of his own intellectual and perhaps artistic capacities and interests as his experience in these fields grows, what is best in life for him and how he intends to pursue it.

(Bruford 1975: 29–30)

A wide body of European novels exemplifies this concept: from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Lehrjahre* (1796) to Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1849), from Gustave Flaubert’s *L’éducation sentimentale* (1869) to James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). As the definition indicates, the Bildungsroman appears against the background of a modern society, in which the shared character of values that bound together older forms of society (particularly the ones based on religion) has become problematic. Hence, the depiction of young people trying to find out what may guide them.

The search for such values explains the appearance of two important motifs in the genre, which are the thematisation of guiding figures and the inclusion of rites of passage. In its turn, the first motif crystallises under two specific forms: the clash with established authority, on the one hand, and the acceptance of new mentors, on the other. In the case of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, figures of ‘established authority’ appear in the beginning, the middle and the end of the film, and in each one of these cases, Fuser has an issue with the rules they set. Thus, the beginning of the film suggests that Ernesto’s journey implies his defying of his father’s advice to finish his studies. This is historically incorrect, but serves to make clear, from the start, that Ernesto’s priorities do not coincide with those of his father. In Chile, an outraged Ernesto throws a stone at the supervisors’ truck after witnessing the inhuman treatment of the persons selected for a day’s work by the American-owned Chilean copper mine. In the Peruvian leper community, Fuser and Mial clash with Mother Superior’s rules regarding the use of hand gloves and the attendance of mass.

While the figure of authority is imposed by blood (parents) or institutions (the law, the church), one of the guides or ‘mentors’ appears through chance encounters and responds to a deeper calling. In *The Motorcycle Diaries*, the role of the mentor is fulfilled by Dr. Hugo Pesce, an esteemed leper

specialist in Lima and a professional example for the travel buddies because of his brilliant career. It is no coincidence that they pose as ‘renowned Argentine leper experts’ for a local newspaper in Chile – a trick to win the support of the locals, but also a sign that this is an inner fantasy they cherish. The real expert, Pesce, shows them around in his clinic, contributing to their knowledge on the disease. What turns him into a true mentor, however, is the fact that he also provides a deeper, ideological guidance. Thus, the visit to the leper community in San Pablo takes place on his recommendation – ‘You will find answers there’, he enigmatically says – and it is through him as well that Fuser discovers the writings of José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930) – Latin America’s first Marxist thinker (see Figure 2.1). Fuser starts reading Mariátegui’s *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana/Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (2007 [1928]) in Pesce’s hospital, and flashbacks from the journey pop-up as we listen to quotations from the book read by Fuser’s inner voice. Mariátegui’s lessons thus appear as valid not only for Peru, but also for the Latin America that Fuser and Mial are discovering two decades later. In this respect, Mariátegui represents some sort of abstract version of Pesce’s mentorship. Indirectly, the reading scene in the hospital suggests that Guevara’s later embrace of Marxism found its inspiration in a Latin American tradition of leftist thinking. It was home-bred, so the film suggests, rather than inspired from the outside.

The second recurrent motif is the one of the ‘rite of passage’ – a challenging experience that requires bravery and an overcoming of (mental and physical) barriers and that builds character. This notion applies to the entire journey as a rite of passage: travelling a distance of 8,000 kilometres on a



Figure 2.1 Dr Pesce is an ideological mentor for Fuser and Mial

motorcycle (and sometimes even without it) is a major challenge. It implies some dangers (Fuser's father discreetly hands him a pistol for self-defence) and a high amount of endurance and stamina (they suffer hunger, cold and exhaustion in addition to health problems). It turns adolescents into men. But the notion of 'rite of passage' also applies to a particular part of the journey, the nightly swim across the Amazon. This swim is literally a 'passage', as it leads from one shore to the other. Its challenging nature is underscored by the fact that Fuser nearly drowns half-way, as well as by the anxious shouts of Mial and other witnesses, who beg him to return. It also resembles other, actual rites: Ernesto re-emerges, sound and safe, from the water as from an immense baptism. This rite of passage confirms that the journey has turned him into another person: one who left his old self on one shore, and emerged as a new man on the other.

Bildung in Latin America

Several elements thus prove *The Motorcycle Diaries'* affinity with the Bildungsroman. But a genre is never an abstract, universal category: it manifests itself in concrete forms which are culturally specific. Drawing on a wide body of Latin American novels,⁴ scholars have argued that the Latin American Bildungsroman departs in several ways from its original model. In order to explain this, it is important to stress that the genre's main point of attraction for Latin American writers seems to reside less in the individual's search for meaning and more in the process of socialisation against which this personal quest takes place. To put it differently: Bildungsromans from Latin America are not about individual characters. They are about the society in which they grow up.

This sociological twist in the Latin American perspective on the genre leads to a first important characteristic: the narrative is endowed with a critical dimension. In European models, the ending tends to be conformist. While the protagonist initially rebels against authority, '[u]ltimately, the hero inserts himself back within the rules of society [...] determined to uphold society's values. He gets the job and girl, becoming, as Hegel asserted, a philistine like all others' (Kushigian 2003: 28). By contrast, Latin American Bildungsromans zoom in on the opposite of reinsertion, namely exclusion and marginalisation. *The Motorcycle Diaries* illustrates this idea very clearly. In spite of disagreeing with his father on the desirability of the journey, Fuser is certainly not a rebel at the start: he has a middle-class background, is studying medicine and has a steady relationship with an upper-class girl. If the word 'rebel' applies to him, it is not to the Fuser who leaves Buenos Aires, but to the one who returns to it, wondering about the many situations of injustice he has witnessed along the road ('¿Cuánta

injusticia, no!’ [So much injustice, don’t you think?]). In other words, rebellion is not the input here – it is the output.

A second point of departure concerns the way in which ‘the self’ is moulded. As Yolanda Doub asserts: ‘the Bildungsroman is a narrative of the self, and the self is shaped by gender, race, and class’ (2010: 6). The prototypical hero of the Bildungsroman is a white, middle-class, Christian male, and the protagonists of *The Motorcycle Diaries* at first sight perfectly conform to it.⁵ Given the complex nature of Latin American societies, however, such an identity is questioned by confronting it with forms of (cultural, ethnic, racial) otherness. What is more, while the socialisation depicted in the European Bildungsroman implies that the protagonist gradually learns to adapt to the culture in which they were born – a process commonly described as ‘acculturation’ – the Latin American variant implies the immersion of the protagonist in a more diverse society, in which the different components continuously interact. The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined the term ‘transculturación’ [transculturation] (1891–1969) to describe the creative process which is triggered by this interaction and results in new, unpredictable, hybrid outcomes.⁶ Transculturation – rather than acculturation – is also what the protagonists of Latin American Bildungsromans generally experiment with, according to Yolanda Doub (2010: 6). Indeed, the journey in *The Motorcycle Diaries* opens the characters’ eyes to the ethnic, racial and socio-economic diversity of their continent. Significantly, Fuser’s first awareness of an inner change coincides with their entrance of the Andes – an indigenous part of the Americas – and at the end of the journey, he celebrates the unity of Latin America, referring to it as ‘our mestiza América’ (our mixed, hybrid America).

A third and final singularity of the Latin American Bildungsroman resides in the ‘metonymical’ relationship which it posits between the self and the nation: ‘as the person grows and forms themselves, so does the nation, feeling similar growing pains and struggles with rites of passage as the individual’ (Kushigian 2003: 17). Seen from this perspective, the process of becoming of the young protagonist mirrors the one of the Latin American nation itself, which is presented as an unfinished project. Other scholars point at a possible discrepancy between the self and the nation, which can amount to a form of irony: ‘In the reading of Latin American literature, the characters face an ironic situation: they become mature in an immature nation’ (Latinez 2014: 6). Latin American Bildungsromans can indeed portray characters who, after experiencing mentorship and rites of passage, appear as more mature than the societies in which they live because of their heightened awareness regarding the problems and shortcomings in these societies. *The Motorcycle Diaries*, again, is a case in point: by undergoing a process of formation during his journey, young

Ernesto not only ends up being transformed and ‘transcultured’ through the contact with ethnic and social others. He also starts longing for a change. Fuser turns into Che.

Youthful Optimism

Fuser’s evolution, as depicted by Salles, can be associated with an important strand in Latin American thinking, one that harks back to José Enrique Rodó (1871–1917). In 1900, at the brink of a new century, this Uruguayan intellectual published *Ariel*, one of the most influential essays in Latin American cultural history. The name ‘Ariel’ refers to a character in Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, who is associated with beauty and art, and a faithful servant to his master Prospero. In Rodó’s essay, this symbolism is seized upon to reflect on Latin America and the role of its youth. Exemplifying the then popular genre of the ‘secular sermon’, the essay has an anonymous teacher, referred to as Prospero, address a group of young pupils. They are gathered in his study where a little bronze statue named Ariel indirectly reminds the audience of the importance of culture and art. As a modernist, indeed, Rodó celebrated the spiritual force of books and art. This, however, is not what fosters the link with Salles’ film, even if Fuser is depicted as an avid reader of literature.⁷ What does provide a connection is the fact that Rodó’s emphasis on art and spirituality serves another cause: to articulate a Latin American identity. Indeed, according to the Uruguayan writer, Latin America should distinguish itself from its northern neighbour by valuing art and culture instead of falling prey to the blunt materialism which Rodó believes to be typical for ‘North America’, in this case identified with the United States. What links *The Motorcycle Diaries* to Rodó, then, is the assertion that Latin America has an identity of its own. Ernesto’s personal evolution cannot be dissociated from this insight: the more he changes, the clearer it becomes to him that ‘América’, as a mixture of different cultures and races, has a unique identity. However, in order really to become this ‘mestiza América’, a change is needed, and this is where the second connection to Rodó’s essay comes in: youth.

The emphasis on youth is clear from the start of *Ariel* as the essay is dedicated ‘[t]o the youth of America’ (Rodó 2000: xxx) and the sermon is entirely directed at young pupils. This is the first time in Latin American history that ‘youth’ is addressed as a specific group, as a generation. In a way, then, *Ariel* not only signals the ‘birth’ of Latin America, as a continent with an identity that differs from North America; it also inaugurates the birth of ‘youth’. What is more, the two notions are intimately related. Rodó proclaims that ‘Latin America has a tremendous need for its youth’ (152) and posits the possibility of a new intergenerational relationship:

I believe, as Michelet did, that the true concept of education not only implies the spiritual culture which children receive from the experience of their parents, but also, and frequently much more so, the spiritual culture which the parents receive from the innovating inspiration of their children.

(*ibid.*)

In other words, young people need to inspire the older generations through their intimate relationship to renewal. Change will come from those who have their eye on the future: the young ones.

In Rodó's view, young people are naturally drawn, 'by instinct' (Rodó 2000: 151), to a set of values and feelings with great societal relevance: optimism, energy and enthusiasm, and faith. Not all young people exemplify these values, however. Melancholy, suicide decadence may also attract them, as literary works from romanticism and late 19th-century decadentism show.⁸ In this context, Rodó pleads for a notion of youth that combines youth's 'instinctive' inclination towards positive values like optimism and enthusiasm, with a moral appreciation of these. Youth, in other words, is not only a biological category to Rodó, a segment of society we call 'generation'. It is also a normative one. Young should be young, which means optimistic and (self-)confident. Only then can they take on their true mission and renew society by infusing it with their energy and idealism.

This positive view on youth is incarnated by Ernesto in Salles' film. Not only does his character illustrate a strong belief that one can achieve a particular goal (such as travelling 8,000 kilometres on an old motorcycle). His pensive gaze at the end of the film, after referring to the many unjust situations he has witnessed, indicates that he is already looking for a way to change this situation. What young people should bring to their societies, and to Latin America in particular, is renewal. It is their historic mission if they behave the way they should, which is to say with faith, optimism and energy.

After his death, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara turned into one of the most potent icons of this kind of youth, not only in Latin America, but also beyond. He had a very strong appeal on 'emerging adults' throughout the world, infusing them with his enthusiasm and belief that the world could be changed. The fact that his most important image showed him beyond his 30s, as I will discuss in the next chapter, also suggests that 'emerging adulthood' is a relative category. As a stage in life that decides upon who one wants to become, emerging adulthood is marked by fluid borders in terms of age. Though Ernesto Guevara graduated as a doctor and married twice, these traditional markers of adulthood do not seem to have stopped his youthful energy and enthusiasm. If youth is not only a biological category, but also

a moral and normative one, as José Enrique Rodó asserted, then perhaps Guevara incarnates a form of eternal youth: one that maintains its faith that things can change if you believe in them; one that never dies, but is interrupted by death only.

General Note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Portuguese and Spanish language sources are the author's

Notes

- 1 Fuser was the nickname given to Ernesto by Alberto, who was his rugby coach. As a contraction of the first syllables of 'furibundo' [furious] and Serna (for Guevara de la Serna), it referred to Ernesto's tempestuous way of playing rugby. Mial was Ernesto Guevara's nickname for Alberto Granado, and a contraction of 'Mi Alberto' [My Albert]. In order to avoid confusion, I will use Ernesto Guevara or 'Che' to refer to his historic persona, and preserve 'Fuser' and 'Ernesto' for his fictionalised persona in *The Motorcycle Diaries*.
- 2 The notion of 'adolescence' as a distinct age category, linked among other things to irresponsible and frivolous behaviour, was introduced in 1942 by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons (see Parsons 1942).
- 3 Some important works in this context include Guillaumin (2000) and (2001), Galland (2003) and Fejtö (2013). See also 'Finir l'adolescence' [Ending Adolescence], a special issue of the *Revue française de psychanalyse*, Vol. 77, No 2, 2013. For an early comment on the notion, see Béjin (1983).
- 4 Some works analysed are: Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*, Carlos Fuentes' *Las buenas conciencias*, Ricardo Güiraldes' *Don Segundo Sombra*, Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, Miguel Barnet's *Oficio de Angel*, Marta Traba's *Conversación al sur* and Mario Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros*.
- 5 True, they refuse to attend mass in San Pablo, but their behaviour shows they are familiar with the codes and practices of Catholicism as part of their cultural environment.
- 6 In his book *Contrapunteo Cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* [*Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*] (1940), Ortiz demonstrated the conceptual shortcomings of the term 'acculturation' to describe the agricultural practices in Cuba regarding tobacco and sugar, highlighting the multicultural context in which these occurred.
- 7 The historic Ernesto also seems to have been an avid reader of literature. See on this, Piglia (2008).
- 8 Concrete works which Rodó may have in mind here are *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* (J.W. Von Goethe 1774) and *A Rebours* (J-K. Huysmans 1884).

3 Rejuvenating Che

Every morning, at every primary school in Cuba, schoolchildren salute Che Guevara. One of them shouts ‘Pioneers for communism’ and the group answers: ‘We will be like Che!’ (¡Seremos como el Che!).¹ This outcry echoes the ‘Let us be like Che!’ (¡Seamos como el Che!) which Fidel Castro pronounced in 1967 during a tribute to Guevara, shortly after the military in Bolivia had put an end to his life.² The sentence became a slogan, and Che turned into a model for Cuban society, and particularly its youth. But even before his death, Che’s relationship with the youth was strong. As someone who took on major political responsibilities in the first years of the Revolution, he wrote and delivered many speeches, several of which were explicitly addressed to young Cubans (Guevara 2000). Similar to Rodó’s Prospero, Guevara exhorted his young listeners to be forceful and optimistic, and dedicate themselves to the country’s economy and well-being. For all hope was placed on ‘the young ones’, the ones who would not be hampered by the residues of a bourgeois upbringing. The ones who would give birth to the Revolution’s highest aspiration: a ‘New Man’.

In this light, Salles’ return to Guevara’s youth implies a return to the part of his life in which he was ‘an Old Man’. This is less paradoxical than it seems. ‘Youth’ and ‘newness’ draw on the same kind of imagery, the same rejection of what appears as old or outdated. And yet, inserting this youthful part of Che’s life into the overall biographical narrative is not an easy job either. It implies intervening, through minuscule operations sometimes, in the ever-moving web of images and texts surrounding Guevara’s public persona. It is on these operations that this chapter focuses.

The Travel Notes

Let us start with the most obvious: the way in which *The Motorcycle Diaries* refers to Ernesto Guevara’s own account of the journey. Before anything, it is important to mention that Guevara was an avid traveller even before

Alberto Granado invited him in 1952 to hit the road together. In 1950, for instance, he had explored Argentina's North-Eastern region on a solo motor trek that had lasted several weeks and was immortalised in a picture in a local newspaper, of Che on a self-fabricated motorcycle (see Figure 3.1). In 1953, he was off again, on a second long journey across Latin America that was supposed to take him to Venezuela, from where he hoped to travel on to Paris together with his old buddy Mial. Things turned out differently and after several detours Guevara ended up in Cuba. Still, he would continue travelling for the rest of his life, but now as representative of Fidel Castro's regime first, and later as guerrillero on a self-declared internationalist mission.

Ernesto Guevara's impressions of these journeys are preserved in letters, notes and books, enriched by the testimonies of friends, family and travel buddies.³ Salles' film very clearly draws on this documentation. When Fuser pronounces the key sentence of the film – 'All this wandering around Our America with a capital A has changed me more than I thought' – he



Figure 3.1 Ernesto Guevara on his self-fabricated motorcycle in 1950

pronounces a sentence that word for word is in Guevara's diary (Guevara 2004a: 32). This diary was a revised version of the annotations Ernesto made during his journey. It was published posthumously, in 1992, under the title *Notas de viaje/Travel Notes* (Guevara 1992).

In fact, Guevara's habit of writing down his impressions as traveller and guerrillero started with the 1952 journey and would last until his death in 1967. It yielded books like *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* (Guevara 1963)/*Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* (Guevara 1968c) and *El diario del Che en Bolivia* (Guevara 1968b)/*Bolivian Diary of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara* (Guevara 1968a), evoking his experiences as guerrilla fighter in Cuba's Sierra Maestra and Bolivia, respectively. These books circulated widely during the 1960s and 1970s and the *Bolivian Diary* even beat García Márquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude* as the number one bestseller from Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. By contrast, the 1952 *Travel Notes* – or *Motorcycle Diaries* as they were rebaptised after the release of Salles' film – remained relatively unknown. This was not due to a lack of awareness that these notes existed.⁴ The world was simply much more interested in the 'adult' Guevara, who had come to power and died in such a spectacular way: Latin America's last hero and last martyr, so to speak.

In this context, the publication of Guevara's diary by the Cuban authorities at the beginning of the 1990s is an interesting fact by itself. Its background is the biographical turn in the writings on Che Guevara as a historical figure.⁵ Rather than on his ideological texts, the new focus was on his life. This move away from the ideological Guevara was itself part of a more profound transformation in international politics during the 1990s. The Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 changed the relationship between Cuba and the West. For many, communism became an anachronistic phenomenon at the international level, one that could still be observed, almost as a curiosity, in specific parts of the planet. A new form of Cuba tourism saw the light, directed not only at those who were looking for sunny beaches and a deep blue sea, but also at those who felt nostalgia for revolutionary icons, the most important one being Guevara (Prestholdt 2019: 197). The publication of his youthful diary in 1992, authorised by a Cuban state in desperate need for financial resources, played into this new interest in Guevara. Salles' film equally participates in this wider phenomenon. At the same time, the film corresponds to something more than a simple return to a young Guevara as an unexplored side of his personality. It also represents a deliberate intent to refreshen and 'rejuvenate' Guevara's image in a changing ideological context.

While acknowledging its debt to the travel diary in the end credits, indeed, Salles' film departs from it in several respects. A first important difference relates to genre: the film does not adopt the format of a diary but

instead opts for letters. This epistolary dimension is ensured by Ernesto's voice addressing his mother in his letters to keep her updated on the trip. It is a historic fact that Guevara was an assiduous letter writer, but as for the 1952 journey, the main source of documentation is his diary, based on his travel notes.⁶ As a matter of fact, the format of the letter serves a particular purpose: it allows Salles to trace the inner changes of the main character from a relational perspective. Letters – as opposed to diaries – are addressed to a person other than the writer, and they imply a form of intimacy. The fact that the addressee is Ernesto's mother in the film accentuates his profile as a young person – a son rather than a grown-up. The more intimate, relational aspect extends to the film's viewer as his or her position as an indirect witness of the journey is similar to the one of the mother. This procedure illustrates Salles' endeavour not only to make a historical film, but also to involve the viewer in the emotions portrayed and touch him or her in a parallel manner to the way Ernesto is touched. It is part of a politics of affect: to reach the viewer emotionally (see also Chapter 6).

A second important difference resides in the fact that a diary tends to offer a rather flat, chronological account of events. This is also the impression one derives from reading Guevara's diary. Though certain passages convey some excitement on behalf of the writer, the diary's form of narration is basically episodic, not dramatic, one experience following upon another in chronological order. In the film, by contrast, there is a build-up towards an inner change, leading to a new vocation. This is particularly noticeable when we compare the points of culmination in the film – Fuser's birthday celebration in Peru, followed by his swim across the Amazon – with the way these appear in the diary. In Chapter 6, I will analyse these passages in more detail. Suffice it to say for now that they appear as rather simple and anecdotal facts in the diary, without the transcendence granted to these moments in the film.

Thirdly, there are a number of interesting omissions with respect to the original version. First of all, the Latin American dimension of the journey is foregrounded in the film in comparison to the travel notes. This is particularly clear from the elimination of all references to the United States in the film. A striking example is the beginning of the book, when the journey is presented as thrilling because it will lead them to 'North America!' (Guevara 2004a: 33), but one notices the same phenomenon also in other scenes.⁷ Another observation is that Ernesto's discovery of the 'mestizo character' of América in the film, and his growing identification with people from other classes and races, contrasts with passages in his writings that would be considered racist and offensive from a contemporary perspective. Thus, he asserts that black people owe their pure black colour to 'their lack

of affinity with bathing'. Guevara (2004a: 161) speaks mockingly about the homosexual character of one of his hosts (150) and compares some of the leper patients to figurants in a horror movie (154).⁸ Such references are eliminated from the film, turning it into a politically correct version of the diary. Last but not least, the reference to age, and specifically to Alberto's 30th anniversary as a motivating factor, is conspicuously absent from Guevara's diary.⁹ Age was clearly not a concern for Guevara when he turned his notes into a book. It generally tends not to be when one is young.

Such omissions serve the purpose of rewriting the original travel into a narrative that allows to present the journey as a journey of self-discovery with political resonance. In fact, the whole part on the San Pablo leper community receives much more attention in the film than it was granted in the book (see also Chapters 5 and 6 of this book). In combination with the fact that the subsequent parts of the journey (in Colombia, Venezuela and – for Ernesto – Miami) are not represented in the film, San Pablo becomes the 'true' destination of the trip, the emotional and intellectual climax of this journey of formation. It is here where the transformation of Guevara is completed. The episodic character of the diary is thus replaced by a teleological narrative that endows the different stages of the journey with meaning within an encompassing narrative of change and becoming.

A last important link with the diary takes us back to the beginning of the film, where another quote from the diary asserts the following: 'This is not a story of incredible heroism [...] It is a glimpse of two lives that ran parallel for a time, with similar hopes and convergent dreams' (Guevara 2004a: 31). These words were written just one year after the trip during Guevara's rewriting of his notes when still young and certainly not yet the hero of the Cuban Revolution. The word 'heroism' rather refers to the reputation which Ernesto had earned himself, thanks to this journey as a dare-all. As his friend Carlos 'Calica' Ferrer recalls,

At first we had followed their escapades through their correspondence with the Guevara family, devouring those letters like an adventure novel. Thus, Ernesto returned as a hero in our eyes; in admiration we listened to him recount his exploits time and time again. I recall one of our favorite stories: the trip in the Mambo-Tango raft. (Ferrer 2006: 15)

For the audience of Salles' film, however, the quotation works with respect to Guevara's public image as hero of the Cuban Revolution. This recontextualisation of the quote allows Salles to insist on Guevara's human, personal qualities, before he became a legend: the man, instead of the myth, and within this man, the young person.

Letters and Biographies

But how important was this 1952 journey in Guevara's life after all? Was it really a 'life-marking event' as the film suggests? As mentioned before, Ernesto Guevara testified to its transformative dimension only one year after the journey. How was he to know that, some years later, he would become a hero for the Cuban people? Nor do his next steps after graduating confirm he was searching for that kind of destiny. For his second journey across Latin America, which started in 1953, he did not even buy a return ticket. As he explained in a letter to his mother, he had embarked on some globetrotting mission: a plan of ten years of wandering during which he wanted to see the world, including the United States, Asia and – most of all – Paris.¹⁰ If anything had become clear to him, it was that it was NOT time yet to settle down, but enjoy his freedom.

In fact, if one reads through Guevara's personal correspondence, it is 1956, rather than 1952, which appears as the decisive year in his life. A first reference to it is still cautious: 'This year [1956] could be the turning point of my life, although I have had so many that nothing surprises me or moves me very much' (quoted in Guevara Lynch 2008: 298). Two months later, though, he confirms his impression: 'I had prepared a life plan that included ten years of wandering, later years studying medicine and later, if there was any time left, I would take up the great adventure of physics. All that's in the past' (304). Though not abandoning his prospect of travelling to other continents, Guevara sensed his wandering was becoming of a different nature. As he himself declared, instead of by curiosity only, it would from now on also be motivated by a new and deeper desire: 'to join the struggle of the people' (ibid.). What turned 1956 into a special year was – as other sources confirm¹¹ – the meeting with the Cuban exiled community in Mexico, and particularly with Fidel Castro. Guevara's letters refer to this new contact in vague and elusive terms because the activities of Castro's movement were supposed to be kept a secret. What is important for my analysis is that by placing the focus on 1952 rather than 1956 Salles re-centres the story of Guevara's life in comparison to his letters.

Another important aspect of *The Motorcycle Diaries* concerns the way in which Guevara's early travelling experiences are connected to his future political commitment. Salles' film suggests that one came from another: after saying goodbye to Mial, in Venezuela, the camera transports us to Cuba, as though this were the next, logical stop in his restless life. Guevara's letters, by contrast, reveal a tension between his travelling and his later commitment to the Cuban Revolution. More concretely, Guevara mentions the presence of 'two impulses that live inside [him], the sort of socialistic, and the traveller' and refers to these as being 'already at war' (quoted

in Guevara Lynch 2008: 228). One can assume that committing himself to Castro's movement of liberation implied renouncing his globetrotting dreams, at least for a while. Where Salles constructs a continuum, Guevara experiences a conflict. As he himself declares, the conflict will even imply 'purging' himself of another side of his personality:

I have done all I could to purge myself not only of that unknown, moderate being, but also of the other one, the bohemian, unconcerned about his neighbour, with a feeling of self-sufficiency due to the knowledge, misguided or otherwise, of his own strength. (quoted in Guevara Lynch 2008: 294–5)

Other accounts of Che's life, both from first-hand witnesses (Gadea, Ferrer) and biographers (Sinclair, Anderson, Taibo II, Castañeda), confirm the idea of a turning point in 1956. Moreover, if any journey played a decisive role in this respect, it would be the one of 1953, which Guevara embarked upon after graduating. Though this journey also led across Latin America, the route chosen by Ernesto Guevara and Carlos 'Calica' Ferrer – his second travel buddy – was different. It started in Bolivia, where a political reform had attracted Guevara's attention, and then passed through Ecuador, where the buddies became acquainted with fellow travellers from Argentina on their way to Guatemala. Formerly known as a typical banana republic, this small country had turned into a hotspot for leftist activists, thanks to President Jacobo Arbenz (1951–54) and the way he addressed the issue of land reform in 1951. Guevara decided to make a detour via Guatemala, while his friend Calica had already moved on to Venezuela. In the Central American country, however, important things would affect Guevara's personal life: not only did he meet the Peruvian exile Hilda Gadea, who would become his first wife, but he also witnessed the tragic downfall of the democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz as a result of a CIA-induced military coup. In her own memoirs, Gadea (1972) presented these years as the 'decisive years' in Guevara's life, extending them to Mexico, where they lived for a while and where they had a baby. It is here, also, that Guevara was introduced to Fidel Castro Ruz.

Castro's name does not appear in *The Motorcycle Diaries*. The end credits briefly mention that Guevara became a hero of the Cuban Revolution. One could say that Salles' insistence on Guevara's first journey across Latin America, instead of his second, amounts to a partial depoliticisation of Guevara with respect to the choices he made after meeting Fidel Castro. Rather than focusing on Guevara's political awakening as it resulted from his second journey, *The Motorcycle Diaries* places the emphasis on Guevara's humanitarianism as a future doctor and volunteer in a leper

centre, and situates the origin of his future evolution in this earlier commitment and the encounters he made with other people along the road. That said, an evocation of the second journey would have implied referencing concrete historical events, while Salles' film grants the journey a sense of actuality, suggesting that it could still be made today and inspire the same kind of humanitarian commitment with the deprived and marginalised.

Images and Pictures

But Guevara is more than the texts he wrote or that others wrote about him. He is also a man who became world famous, thanks to photography. As an expression of a visual medium, Salles' film was bound to engage with the images surrounding Che Guevara. Here too, the film impacts on the existing iconography. The classic pictures of Guevara show him as an adult with a full-grown beard, a cigar, a military costume, the star on his beret as commander and communist, a man in his 30s. This is the person who incarnated the ideal of 'the new man'¹²: an exemplary revolutionary in Cuba, preaching the importance of self-sacrifice and particularly volunteer work, and an idealist guerrillero for the world, who proclaimed that revolution was possible as long as one was willing to start it themselves.¹³ Such connotations stuck on the visual image of Guevara, and particularly on his iconic picture, entitled *Guerrillero heroico/Heroic Guerrilla* – allegedly the most reproduced photograph in the world (Ziff 2006: 22) (see Figure 3.2).

This is not the image we find in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, however. To portray the young Ernesto, the film uses a Mexican actor who is already an unmistakable film star. We do not *see* a Che Guevara lookalike – we see Gael García Bernal playing a role in which he is supposed to be Guevara. This fictional version of the hero is clearly lacking the iconic markers: no beard, no cigar, no beret, no nothing. Of course, the break with previous representations of Guevara is due to the issue of age: this is a younger Guevara, one who had not even been given the nickname 'Che' yet. Guevara owed this nickname to the Cuban revolutionaries, who used it as a humorous allusion to Guevara's Argentine origin ('che' being a typically Argentine word, something like 'hey'). Guevara adopted it with the same sense of humour, for instance, when he placed these three letters as his official signature on the new Cuban bank notes. In the film, by contrast, he is systematically referred to as 'Fuser' – another historic nickname, for sure, but one that is hardly known by the audience. Because of this nickname and because of the physical features of the actor chosen, there is little linking Salles' protagonist to the mythical Che Guevara. Yet, right from the start, there is a subtle intent to inscribe a new series of pictures in the existing iconography. Shortly after the opening scenes, the camera zooms in on a family



Figure 3.2 Korda's famous picture of Che as 'Guerrillero heroico'

picture of a young man sitting on the floor of his balcony, surrounded by some of his relatives who are standing behind him (see Figure 3.3). At the same time, in the soundtrack, Ernesto presents himself through voiceover narration: 'Eso iba a ser yo' [This would be me, then]. This fictional picture – showing García Bernal – is based on a real youth picture of Guevara, as included in his father's memoirs *Young Che*, showing Ernesto on the balcony of the Guevara apartment in Buenos Aires (Guevara Lynch 2008: 178) (see Figure 3.4). The similarity between this picture and the historic one is not rendered explicit in the film, but Salles does reveal similarities between certain scenes and historic pictures in the end credits, which not only list the historic sources, but also reproduce some of these pictures. Thus, we see the 'real' picture in the Chilean newspaper where the two friends presented themselves as 'experts in leprology'. We also see the one in which they sail off together on their 'Mambo-tango', and on yet another, Guevara is taking care of their motorcycle. It is here, in the end credits, where the historic dimension of the film is foregrounded and somehow 'restored' to scenes that may have appeared as fictional.

But the procedure is more complex than it seems. This is not only a question of reconnecting fiction and history. It is also a matter of inserting a different kind of picture, one less known, into the established iconography on



Figure 3.3 A fictional recreation of a historic picture of young Guevara on the balcony of his family apartment in Buenos Aires for Salles' film



Figure 3.4 Young Guevara on the balcony of his family house in Buenos Aires in 1949–50. Courtesy of the Guevara family, permission granted by Juan Martín Guevara, brother of Che Guevara

the mythical Guevara, and render it more complex.¹⁴ Indeed, the established iconography focused on Guevara as a hero and a martyr, a model and a myth. A rather austere person also, dedicating himself entirely to a higher cause instead of fooling around with girls, mates and motors.

Yet, this austere Che, linked to the ideologue and guerrillero, also emerges in the film. It does so through a set of 'indexical elements' which – taken together – refer to his public persona. Thus, in terms of visuality, we notice that Alberto generally leads in the beginning, as exemplified by the fact that it tends to be Alberto who is steering the vehicle. Once the motorcycle breaks down, however, it is Fuser who takes the lead, indirectly foreshadowing his leadership abilities and association with the 'vanguard'. In a parallel manner, Salles' camera depicts Ernesto as physically growing towards the end, assuming frontal positions and looking at others from above (as when he gazes at the small boats down below from the deck of the Amazonian ferry boat, or when he waves his buddy goodbye standing on the stairs of his cargo plane to Miami). The transformation of his image during the film is gradual and accompanied by other markers. When answering that a revolution cannot be started without arms, in Machu Picchu, an incipient beard is shown around his mouth. When Alberto calls his buddy back for one last joke, just before his plane leaves, he uses the term 'Che'. This 'Che' was absent from the opening quotation in the film, assigned to 'Ernesto Guevara' only, but reappears in the end credits, which present 'Ernesto Che Guevara' as author of the travel diary. The austere Che also appears when he tells the truth at all points, irrespective of if he hurt people's feelings – like in the discussion about his host having a tumour, or Dr Pesce being a bad novelist. In this way, the journey from Buenos Aires to Venezuela is simultaneously presented as a formative journey that leads from the young man to the mythical hero. From 'Ernesto' to 'Che'.

In terms of visuality, the most prominent marker of Guevara, however, remains his gaze. In a well-documented study on Che's afterlife, Michael Casey presents Che's gaze in the *Heroic Guerrilla*-picture as its key feature:

The most captivating feature of Korda's photo [*Heroic Guerrilla*] is Che's eyes. Che's piercing gaze gives the image its power as a timeless work of art. Variouslly described as pensive, serene, determined, defiant, meditative or implacable, his expression is – like the Mona Lisa's smile – difficult to put a finger on. It contains what French philosopher Roland Barthes [...] once described as the punctum of a powerful photograph, its 'sting, speck, cut, little hole ... that accident which pricks me, ... bruises me, is poignant to me.' Che's eyes appear to be looking right through us, as if he is focused on some far-off horizon with its promise of a future utopia (Casey 2009: 36).



Figure 3.5 Fuser ‘becomes’ Che and acquires a ‘vision’

In order to explain the impact of this gaze, Casey moreover refers to studies in political iconology, claiming that great leaders are generally associated with the ability to having ‘a far vision, the idea that they see things on the horizon that we can’t see’ (Perlmutter quoted in *ibid.*).

Seen in this light, it is important to pay attention to the way in which this gaze slowly emerges in Salles’ film. First, it is an enraged look at the foremen of the site of the copper mine in Chile expressing indignation about the way their workers are treated. Second, it is a serious, meditative look when Fuser stares at the small boats following the huge ferry boat in which Mial and Fuser are lodging. Third, it is the distant gaze, looking at some far-away horizon – possibly the river Amazon – while Alberto is telling him that he may have found himself a job in Venezuela. Whereas the young man sitting on the floor of his balcony in the beginning of the film had looked us straight into the eyes, the one that emerges towards the end of the film fixes his gaze at a distant horizon (see Figure 3.5), just like in the *Heroic Guerrilla* (see Figure 3.2). This is a man who evolved from merely seeing into having a vision.

Icons and Models

While rewriting and reorganising Guevara’s words and images, then, Salles also makes sure ultimately to reconnect the two parts of his life: the part in which he was ‘young’, and the part in which he was famous. In doing so, Salles goes beyond the simple addition of a ‘prequel’ to a well-known public life. As announced in the beginning of this chapter, he also rewrites this

life. Because if one changes the beginning, one also changes what comes from it.

In order to explain this, I first need to shed a closer look at the circumstances in which the most important image of his public figure, the *Heroic Guerrilla* picture, started to circulate.¹⁵ The picture was taken in 1960 by Cuban photographer Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez (1928–2001), better known as ‘Korda’, at a commemorative event for the tragic victims of an (as of today never clarified) explosion in Havana’s port – possibly a terrorist attack on the young revolution. The serious gaze of Guevara was directed at something specific: the mourning crowd. It lost this referential quality, however, in exchange for another. At an international conference in Havana in July 1967 (so prior to Guevara’s death), Fidel Castro launched Guevara’s picture as a propaganda instrument for the concept of ‘armed struggle’. This concept referred to the guerrilla warfare, which had brought Fidel Castro and his men to power in 1959. Guevara himself had explained the principles of this kind of warfare in his book *Guerra de guerrillas: un método* (1960)/*Guerrilla Warfare: A Method* (1964). As an Argentine who had fought for the freedom of the Cuban people, Guevara moreover incarnated the idea that it was a revolutionary’s duty to change society wherever this was needed.

This internationalist dimension of Guevara’s persona explains why his image had such an appeal outside Cuba, igniting with his example a restless youth that was dreaming of change on a global level. From Cuba, it travelled to France first, where *Paris Match* published an article on Guevara in 1967, accompanied by Che’s picture, under the title ‘Che Guevara: ‘Où est-il donc?’ [Where the hell is he?] (Larteguy 1967). This alluded to the fact that Guevara had left Cuba in 1965 on a secret mission to foster a new revolution in other parts of the world. His spectral presence infused the image of the *Heroic Guerrilla* with even more power. Not surprisingly, the picture maintained its aura after Guevara’s assassination in 1967, which turned him, from simply a ‘missing’ person, into a ‘forever missing’ one. As an image, though, Che started to travel the world more intensely than ever.

An important factor in this was the posthumous publication of Guevara’s *Bolivian Diary* (Guevara [1968a]). The *Heroic Guerrilla* picture, chosen as its cover, became tainted with the drama of a guerrilla fighter who was writing down his last words without knowing it. Feltrinelli – the Italian editor of the diary – also used the picture for an entirely new genre: the political poster (Kunzle 1997; Ziff 2006: 26). True, posters had been used for political purposes in earlier decades, but never before had these been purchased by a generation of emerging adults longing for change. It was this poster which was carried along everywhere during the student revolts of the late



Figure 3.6 Student revolts in the 1960s made frequent use of Che's famous Heroic Guerrilla picture

1960s (see Figure 3.6), and which decorated their rooms with its colours and radiance. Che's death had turned him into more than a martyr – he became a model of how to live and to act. Taken at a moment when Guevara was in the prime of his life, moreover, seven years before his death, *Heroic Guerrilla* constituted simultaneously the most forceful reply to the pictures circulated by the Bolivian military to prove Guevara dead. Those pictures had shown a dirty and bewildered Guevara, humiliated as captive, and later on, as a dead person, eerily staring into the camera. *The Heroic Guerrilla* not only showed him as a young and vital man still; it also, implicitly suggested, that the fight would go on, in spite of (or perhaps precisely because of) his untimely death.

But this very notion of 'fight' became caught in a complex and diversified web of meanings. What exactly did this transnational youth fight for, and by what means? Che's figure turned into a magnet for a wide range of heterogeneous, and often mutually conflicting, ideologies: from liberal anti-authoritarianism to communist orthodoxy, from armed struggle to hippy pacificism. What all of these had in common, however, was that they drew upon Guevara as a transnational 'icon of dissent'.

Jeremy Prestholdt defines icons of dissent in the following way:

They represent the rejection of, or resistance to, global structures of power and hegemonic systems such as colonialism, imperialism, and capitalist exploitation. Their stance against systemic forms of domination and inequality has encouraged audiences to invest them with

inherently political meaning. This in turn distinguishes icons of dissent from other popular personalities. (Prestholdt 2019: 3–4)

Prestholdt considers Guevara as the primary example of this category and traces its evolving meanings from the 1960s to the present day, stating that Guevara's commercialisation has not deprived him from his radiance as a symbol of dissent, in fact quite the contrary. However, this persistent popularity also relies on a recycling of Guevara's figure in a context where several of his connotations, and particularly the ones which linked him to armed struggle, became highly problematic. This was particularly the case in Latin America. While in Europe and the United States street protests generally had no lasting impact on those who took part in them, in Latin America, young demonstrators met with brutal repression. The military coups that succeeded each other in rapid order from the 1970s onwards precisely seized upon the ideology of 'armed struggle' to proclaim the necessity of a strong counter-insurgency policy. In practice, this amounted to a form of state terrorism in which young idealists, generally belonging to the category of 'emerging adults', were targeted as 'subversive elements' and eliminated through torture, enforced disappearances and exile. Though launched with quite different purposes then, the ideology of 'armed struggle', as incarnated by Guevara and the Cuban Revolution, became enmeshed with a culture of violence that took tens of thousands of young lives, plunging their families and loved ones in grief and despair for years on end.

Once democracy returned from the 1990s onwards, the memory of Guevara remained controversial in Latin America. This was not only due to Che's propagation of 'armed struggle' – which obviously clashed with democratic values and had cost so many young lives – but also to his very association with the figure of Fidel Castro, who, after decades in power, still rejected open elections and represented a regime that had become tainted with images of political violence (persecution of homosexuals, repression of artists, political prisoners).

It is from these unhappy, tragic memories that Guevara's image is washed through Salles' focus on young Ernesto. This Guevara has not taken up arms yet, has not yet met Fidel Castro. The pistol handed to him by his father in the beginning of the film is clearly meant to be a weapon of self-defence. It is used only once in the film: to shoot a duck for dinner.¹⁶ Restoring his youthful innocence to Guevara is then a first effect of the rewriting which Salles performs. But portraying Guevara as a young person also activates other aspects of his image.

First of all, he becomes a travelling figure, one who – according to the film – kept on travelling until he found death in a foreign country.¹⁷ His activities

as guerrilla fighter – someone continuously on the move, as Guevara defined him in his book on guerrilla warfare – are absorbed into this wider image and up to a certain point neutralised by it. The quick summary of Che's life in the end credits links his passage through Congo and Bolivia to his endeavour to 'fight[ing] for his ideals' – an expression which can have both a literal and a symbolic meaning. The scene in which the real Alberto Granado suddenly is shown on screen, an aged man now in his eighties, shows him staring at the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse from his far-away friend. Alberto is the one who stayed in Cuba, Guevara himself moved on.

Second, the insistence on young Guevara restores the image of the medical student to his biography. Right from the start, emphasis is placed on this career choice in a conversation at Chichina's vacation house, when Alberto and Ernesto react, with a contemptuous grin, to the news that a relative of hers is studying law. Law is identified with the rich, it is suggested, whereas medicine evokes the idea of rendering a service to a wider community. Profiling a young Guevara on his way of becoming a doctor, rather than a guerrillero, allows Salles to emphasise his humanitarian nature: his identification with those who suffer, rather than with those who are inspired by some form of ideology (communism or the like). While earlier in this chapter I mentioned that Guevara described his process of becoming as a 'purge' of his old, bohemian self, Salles suggests that he was and fundamentally remained someone in need of helping those in pain.

Given the importance of messages of hope and brotherhood in Salles' other films (see Chapter 1), it is not surprising that this image of a humanitarian Guevara should have appealed to the director. Moreover, it can be reconciled with a new context of activism that emerged around 2000 as a reaction to globalisation. As Prestholdt asserts,

Millennial political thinkers have keenly diagnosed contemporary global ills, and movements such as Occupy have reinvigorated critiques of capitalism. But they less frequently speak of a utopian future and their path towards the realisation of another world is often opaque.

(2019: 28)

Rather than aspiring to systemic changes, the new activism is more issue-oriented, but it was and still is transnational, using the increased means to communicate fast around the globe offered by internet and Twitter. As a symbol of transnational connectivity aspiring to change, Guevara lives on even in a world where communism has become a marginalised, anachronistic reference. Salles' updating of his figure fits the agenda of new leftist movements. Adding a chapter to his life in which Guevara was young, Salles 'rejuvenates' the adult one, granting him a fluidity from

which other life paths could have been taken, but that all stem from a profoundly humanitarian calling. Most importantly, these gestures restore to him what comes with youth only, and got lost along the way: his innocence in a world of violence.

General Note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Portuguese and Spanish language source are the author's.

Notes

- 1 To get an impression of this ritual, see '¡Seremos como el Che! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RnlLyA8f9A>.
- 2 Guevara was killed on 9 October 1967. The speech took place during a tribute to Guevara in Cuba, on 18 October 1967.
- 3 See Ferrer (2006), Granado (2003) and Guevara Lynch (2008). For a personal account of Guevara's second trip across Latin America, see Guevara (2002).
- 4 For some early accounts of the trip, see Granado (1967), Sinclair (1970) and Sneath (1978). For a more extensive account, see e.g. Anderson 1997 (73–110).
- 5 See Drinot (2010: 4). According to Drinot, the biographical turn was followed by an autobiographical turn, consisting of the publication of the travel diaries.
- 6 In order not to complicate things, I here focus only on the links with Guevara's diary, not the one written by Alberto Granado. In case there are significant discrepancies between their accounts, I mention this in the text.
- 7 Other examples can be found in the visits to the mining sites in Chile (with reference to the 'blond' supervisors (Guevara 2004a: 78) – and the information on the Machu Picchu site (discovered by a US archeologist) (109) and also visited by North American tourists (111).
- 8 These politically incorrect passages include his judgement on Jews ('someone called Cohen; we had heard a lot about him, that he was Jewish as far as money was concerned but a good sort' (Guevara 2004a: 139)).
- 9 Nor does it appear in Alberto Granado's account of it. To simplify things, as noted above, this chapter focuses on Guevara's account of the trip only, except when there are significant differences between the two accounts.
- 10 As Che is quoted in his father's biography, 'But my firm goal continues to be Paris, and I will get there even if I have to swim the Atlantic' (Guevara Lynch 2008: 261).
- 11 See, for instance, Castañeda (1998: 55) and Taibo II (2017: 103).
- 12 This notion became especially popular after Ernesto Guevara published the essay 'El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba' in the Uruguayan magazine *Marcha* in 1965 (see Guevara 2011).
- 13 These ideas became known as 'foquismo' (derived from 'foco' – burning point) and were granted a theoretical underpinning in *¿Revolución en la revolución?* (1967) by French fellow traveller Régis Debray.
- 14 On Guevara's iconology, see Kunzle (1997), Ziff (2006) and Kunzle (2015).
- 15 The following draws on Casey (2009) and Prestholdt (2019).
- 16 And when Guevara replies that any revolution requires the use of arms, this is but an isolated sentence, appearing as a quick reply to a joke of Alberto's: that marrying an Incan princess would allow him to start a biological revolution in the interest of the people.

- 17 The newness of this focus appears when comparing Salles' film to other evocations of Guevara. See, for example, the multifaceted account of Guevara's personality by Andrew Sinclair: '[...] a doctor, a diarist, a political and military theorist, a guerrilla fighter, an economist, a tactician, a banker, a planner, an industrialist, an ambassador, or a propagandist' (1970: 1124). 'Guevara the traveller' is strikingly absent from the list.

4 The Road Movie Revisited

‘The book is an incredible ode to youth’. This is how Walter Salles expressed his fascination with *On the Road*, the 1957 novel by Jack Kerouac which he in 2012 turned into a film (Clever News 2012). In addition to a book on youth, *On the Road* is generally referred to as the seminal novel of the road movie genre (Cohan and Hark 1997: 7; Laderman 2002: 10), a category that applies to most of Salles’ films. In fact, Salles’ breakthrough as a filmmaker coincided with his discovery of the road movie. Both *Foreign Land* (1995) and *Central Station* (1998) depict journeys by young characters. Both also reflect a wider history of movement in Brazil (transnational and internal migration, respectively). While the personal inflection of the genre in these films helped put Salles’ name on the cinematic map, *The Motorcycle Diaries* turned him into a major point of reference. The film’s worldwide success demonstrated that the road movie, as a genre evoking travels, itself had started to travel yielding interesting examples across the globe and in particular in Latin America.¹ Of the increasingly diverse group of directors who feel drawn to it, Salles is the only one until now who also attempted to formulate his ideas on the genre in a more theoretical way. He did so in his essay ‘Notes for a Theory of the Road Movie’ (2007), which links the road movie to the idea of resistance. This chapter explains how this idea comes to the fore in *The Motorcycle Diaries* and how it is relevant to Salles’ view on youth. Before doing so, a brief presentation of the road movie as a genre, and a commentary on its connection to Kerouac’s novel is provided to help situate *The Motorcycle Diaries* with respect to examples from North American cinema.

The US Model of the Road Movie

Extended highways, unhampered driving and fancy cars and motorcycles – these are the images that come to mind when one thinks about the ‘road movie’.² Such images were coined by a set of US films that appeared

at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the most iconic one being *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969). In this film, two men in their 20s embark on an unmotivated journey across the West of the Americas, driving smoothly through iconic landscapes, reminiscent of a long filmic tradition of Westerns. In the end, they are abruptly shot by a conservative truck-driver, resentful of the long-haired hippy-style kind of people which they represent. They die on the highway. Accompanied by the still famous rock music of Steppenwolf – ‘Born to be Wild’ – and showcasing their Harley Davidsons, with the engine caps filled with dollars earned from drug selling, the protagonists incarnate the counter-cultural youth which emerged most prominently in the 1960s. An initial scene shows the two drivers taking care of their motorcycles while in the foreground of the screen two cowboys are grooming their horses. This positioning suggests a continuity between the Americans who, infused with the proud spirit of the pioneers, conquered the land in the 19th century and those who decades later still conquer this land symbolically, now on motorcycles instead of horsebacks. In the end, however, the film’s conclusion is negative: ‘We blew it’, one of them says bitterly to the other, shortly before they die. The counter-cultural search of these young men – which includes a visit to a hippy community and the consumption of drugs – ends without any result. Their senseless deaths in the end symbolise an America that has not lived up to the expectations of its foundational project. The tagline of the promotion of the movie says it all: ‘A man went looking for America. And couldn’t find it anywhere’.

Hans Bertelsen (1991) has established a parallelism between the road movie and the Western as two typically American genres that revisit the national project, be it from different perspectives. While the Western revisits the foundational moments of the United States in a nostalgic vein, the road movie continues its imaginary of conquest from a cynical perspective: all these supposedly heroic deeds resulted into nothing. In this respect, the road movie represents a critical take on American culture and it was no doubt helped in this regard by the fact that it originally flourished in the sector of independent filmmaking, at a safe distance from conventional Hollywood filmmaking. Any comparison between *The Motorcycle Diaries* and its North American forerunners in terms of genre should take into account that this genre was not born as a Hollywood entertainment genre, but was impregnated from the start with a spirit of rebelliousness (Tierney 2018). From this rebelliousness to Guevara’s revolutionary mind, there is in fact no far cry.

Besides rebelliousness, there is a direct relationship to youth in *Easy Rider*. As mentioned above, the protagonists are in their 20s. It is not clear what exactly it is they are doing when they are not on the road, but they are obviously not hampered by family nor professional obligations. In the

beginning of the movie, one of them throws away his watch before embarking on the trip – a gesture foregrounded by experimental camera work. These are people travelling for leisure, not for business nor for any practical purpose, and in this leisure time, they essentially seem to head towards where the road takes them. Visually identified with their fancy motorcycles, they also yielded the man–machine image as one of the road movie’s stereotypes.

Travelling in leisure time is also the main occupation of the protagonists of *On the Road* – the 1957 novel by Jack Kerouac which Walter Salles turned into a film in 2012. The students’ group in New York to which Sal Paradise – the fictional avatar of Jack Kerouac – belongs take to the road during holidays. What is more, the road becomes an alternative place for the values incarnated by the parental home, where everything seems dead or sterile, as the main character says.³ In his own take on *On the Road*, Salles insists on this idea of death by including a scene on the graveyard where Sal’s father is buried. For this association of death with a parental figure, Salles draws on the scroll rather than on the novel, for in the latter the journey was grounded in the ending of a love relationship. No doubt, this alternative beginning allows for a stronger analogy with Salles’ previous road movies: both *Foreign Land* and *Central Station* start with the death of a parent. Another point of convergence is the foregrounding of the migrant background of Sal Paradise in the film: he speaks a variant of French (joual) with his mother – a reference to his French–Canadian origins.⁴

Such small discrepancies, however, do not prevent Salles’ *On the Road* from drawing on a basic feature of the genre as it has become identified with the United States. This feature concerns the centrality of the road in the story, and what I have referred to elsewhere as its ‘heterotopic’ dimension (Lie 2017: 40). Michel Foucault (1986) famously coined the term ‘heterotopia’ for places that, while being real, resemble the concept of utopia in the sense that they figure alternative values to the ones upon which society is built.⁵ Thus, the road in Kerouac’s novel is much more than an area that leads to some other place: it is a place in itself. And the form of movement that is depicted in the novel is inspired by being in this place, rather than being headed to some particular destination. To put it differently: ‘to be on the road’ is what road movies are about, which is also why most of them end where they started – by once more hitting the road.

As a place ‘outside’ of conventional society, the road allows for a sense of freedom that is absent from daily life because of all kinds of restrictions. The emblematic scene portraying this freedom in Salles’ interpretation of the film is the one in which the two main characters, Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise, are sitting naked on the front bench of their car, with Marylou – Dean’s wife – sitting in between them. She too is naked and she

is stimulating them sexually as they drive faster and faster into the open horizon (an image from this scene is used for the film poster). The road is the place where a life outside of conventions, marked by sex, drugs and music, can be enjoyed and life can be experienced in its intensity: speed (and the dangers it implies) is a source of ‘kicks’, making us aware that we are alive. On a more abstract level, the road – as a place connecting a point of departure and another one of arrival – represents an intermediate place which becomes symbolic of the in-betweenness of youth itself, as experienced during emerging adulthood (see Chapter 1).

Emerging adulthood’s typical ‘self-focus’ (Tanner and Arnett 2017: 34) does not exclude interest in other people. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise is intrigued by his travel buddy Dean Moriarty, the fictional avatar of Neal Cassidy with whom Jack Kerouac made several journeys between 1947 and 1951. For Walter Salles, the novel is therefore also a book about ‘a unique friendship’ (Salles quoted in Clever News 2012). In road movie terms, it provided the figure of the buddy or travel companion as another typical ingredient of the genre. Dean Moriarty is a charismatic character from the West. Compared to the rather intellectualist friends of Sal Paradise, Dean exudes life, and his charismatic personality attracts not only Sal, but a large group of young people swirling around him. These are people figuring a new generation, one that announces the counter-cultural youth of the 1960s.

This new generation, introduced by *On the Road*, was soon to be called the Beat generation. ‘Beat’ (literally ‘worn out’) referred to the sense of happy exhaustion which the exhilarating experience of following people like Dean Moriarty was supposed to provide. But the word is also derived from ‘beatification’, which points at a form of transcendence and connectedness to deeper meanings (Kerouac 2000: 177). These are youngsters in search of ‘it’ – an undefinable quality of life that grants it meaning once traditional values have become meaningless: hard work, marriage, parenthood. Deprived of their fathers (Sal’s father is dead, Dean’s is missing), there is an inner restlessness in them: ‘We’ve got to go some place, find some thing’ is a key sentence from the novel (Kerouac 2000: 117) – a sentence that returns in *Easy Rider* as a literal quotation, rendering the Kerouacian genealogy explicit.

And so, *On the Road* is a book directly linked to the appearance of youth as a post-war generation, one that no longer identifies with the values of a previous generation and has embarked on a search for new ones through experimentation and a free lifestyle. While in Latin America, the concept of youth as a generation can be traced back to José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* (Chapter 1), in the United States, it arises a few decades later, with its own inflections. ‘From the beat generation on, youth becomes emblematic of the subject that is no longer trapped by the logic of production’ (Piglia 2008:

267–8). By ‘logic of production’, Ricardo Piglia refers to the idea that, from the beat generation onwards, the concept or class was rivalled by the one of generation. Dean and Sal, indeed, belong to different classes, and yet most of the book celebrates their mutual attraction as each other’s others within the same generation: the one from the West (Dean) and the one from the East (Sal), the one who knows what life is about (Dean) and the one who is hoping to find out (Sal). Their friendship unites the opposite forces from which America is made. It is not surprising that the book closes with a lyrical hymn to the United States.

***The Motorcycle Diaries: Shifting Codes*⁶**

The interest in America provides an important link between ‘the Kerouacian tradition’ (*On the Road, Easy Rider*) and *The Motorcycle Diaries*, a film that starts with the prospect of ‘exploring an America [the protagonists] only knew from books’ and ends with a birthday speech celebrating a belonging to a wider, American family. The interest in ‘youth’ and particularly ‘emerging adulthood’ is another point of convergence; as announced above, all protagonists are in their 20s, sufficiently independent to be away from home for several months, but not burdened yet by the social obligations that come with adulthood. However, the relationship between Salles’ film and the road movie idiom deserves closer attention. While scholarship on this question has centred on *The Motorcycle Diaries* on the one hand, and the road movie genre on the other,⁷ I believe the film’s relationship to the North American predecessors alters during the course of the film and therefore needs to be approached in a more dynamic, less binary way. This change is not a matter of inconsistency – on the contrary. The shift in codes is a procedure directly relevant to Salles’ purpose as a director portraying this specific period in Ernesto Guevara’s life.

Let us start with the very title of Salles’ film. Rather than capitalising on Che Guevara as a celebrity, the title immediately activates the link with the road movie genre by foregrounding the motorcycle instead of the historic figure. True, the film opens with some lines from Ernesto Guevara’s travel diary (see Chapter 3), but the quotation insists on the non-heroic character of the journey, suggesting that anyone could have made this journey, not only heroes or martyrs: ‘This is not a story of incredible heroism [...]. It is a glimpse of two lives that ran parallel for a time, with similar hopes and convergent dreams’ (Guevara 2004a: 31). This is exactly how the first half of the film evokes the journey, drawing heavily on the road movie idiom as described above. Of course, the historic coincidences were there already: two men in their 20s, embarking on a trip across the Americas and doing so on a motorcycle. But Salles’ film heightens the analogies by wiping out

the image of the historic Guevara in the initial scenes through the casting of Gael García Bernal as lead and by referring to him by the unknown nickname of Fuser. In this way, Guevara simply becomes one of the two buddies that the genre requires. From a famous historical figure he becomes an everyman.

In a later scene, while driving on the pampa roads, a Western-like musical score that is punctuated by energetic guitar chords sets the tone. A friendly race against some gauchos (Argentine cowboys) (see Figure 4.1), brings to mind *Easy Rider*'s analogy between the Harley Davidsons and the cowboys' horses. This association with the Western confirms the closeness between *The Motorcycle Diaries*' format and the US road movie. Ernesto's voiceover describes Mial's and his sense of freedom as the one of 'adventurers' ready to conquer the world, instead of boring themselves to death with classes and exams at the university. Such words emphasise the break which this journey implies with respect to conventional life. This is a journey for leisure, done over the holidays, and the sense of freedom it grants the two protagonists is matched by the joy of driving freely in the open, on a heterotopic road.

What dominates in the first half of the road movie is the enjoyment of beautiful landscapes, several of which are foregrounded through postcard-like images, adorned with indications of place and date. This iconic identification with the road movie genre – open roads, male drivers, a motorcycle, leisure time – is explicitly announced by the initial description of their travel agenda: 'the purpose: to explore the Americas we only knew from books/the vehicle: "La poderosa"/the method: improvisation'. Other than



Figure 4.1 The two buddies engage in a race with gauchos

the names and choice of actors, the clothing helps de-historicise the journey. In the historic pictures, Alberto Granado is dressed in the typical gaucho-wide pampa trousers, but in the film his clothing is more neutral. While driving across the mountains and open plains, these two boys on a motorcycle could have been driving around today. This, too, is the effect of its road movie allegiance: audiences travel with them as if they could have been one of them. The first part of the film is then clearly inscribed in the codes of the road movie idiom, with prototypical images of the open road as a space of freedom and a foregrounding of the vehicle of the motorcycle. The beauty of the landscapes they cross under way also reminds of the lyrical tribute Kerouac pays to his America in the end of his novel *On the Road*.

Halfway through the film, however, two elements of the original journey are seized upon to introduce a fundamental shift in the film's relation to the road movie format. The first is the breakdown of the motorcycle, which obliges the travellers to continue their journey on foot and by other means – an endeavour declared 'impossible from a human point of view' (*humanamente imposible*) by Mial. Elsewhere, I have proposed the term 'counter-road movie' to refer to an important subcategory of the genre in Latin American cinema:

In this variant of the road movie, journeys either do not materialize, or they become stranded at an early stage in the story. Whereas road movies reflect on mobility in a straightforward manner, counter-road movies reflect on it through its opposite: stasis. [...] This peculiar set of films belongs to the genre because of its shared reliance on the road movie imagery (even if paradoxical). Thus, images of cars, highways, and maps appear in these films, just as they do in regular road movies, only now cars break down, highways become the sites of accidents, and maps do not correspond to what they were supposed to represent. (Lie 2017: 15)

The Motorcycle Diaries undoubtedly contains scenes typical of this subcategory. While Mial mourns the death of his long-cherished vehicle, prolonging the man-machine stereotype of the US road movie, young Ernesto, by contrast, immediately embraces the new opportunities granted to them by the slower pace of their journey. His optimism and perseverance drag Salles' film out of the – typically Latin American – swamp of aborted journeys into which it was falling.

Indeed, the enjoyment of speed in the first part of the movie gives way to another engagement with the surroundings, one in which not only landscapes but also the people in them can be discovered. From a heterotopic area symbolising freedom and self-exploration, the road changes into

something else. It becomes a place of encounter where the absence of the fast vehicles precisely allows for a deeper engagement with those who are different from the protagonists in terms of class, race, ethnicity and age. This implies that ‘the road’, rather than a symbol of life and youth, becomes a meeting ground challenging the ordinary divisions in society. The hetero-topic dimension of the road – as an alternative space – is here joined by a social one reminiscent of Michael Bakhtin’s definition of the ‘chronotope of the road’ (1975) – stories centred around the image of the road.

Encounters in a novel usually take place ‘on the road.’ The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road (‘the high road’), the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another.

(Bakhtin 1981: 243)

The other historic element providing a point of transition in Salles’ film is a conversation with a Chilean couple in the Atacama desert. Suggestively shot as an encounter with people coming from the opposite direction, the scene starts by having the two Chilean travellers relate how they were chased from their homes because of their communist sympathies. Being on their way to the Chuquicamata site of the Anaconda Copper Company, the couple represents the tragic case of the internal migrants who, for political or economic reasons, are forced to travel. After explaining why they are on the road, the couple enquires about the purpose of the journey of the two friends. Suddenly ashamed, Guevara answers in a hesitant way: ‘Viajamos por viajar’ [We travel because we like it]. This answer refers to the Kerouacian inspiration of their journey for movement – being on the road for the sake of it, without a specific motivation – and it leaves the couple perplexed: this is a luxury they themselves cannot afford. It is here where the other notion of ‘road movie’ sets in, one that connects the genre to a discovery of those who do not have the luxury of travelling in leisure time. In his ‘Notes for a Theory of the Road Movie’, Salles puts it like this: ‘road movies are about what can be learned from the other, from those who are different. In a world that increasingly challenges these ideals, the importance of road movies as a form of resistance can’t be dismissed’ (2007: 70). Instead of being a narrative format celebrating personal freedom and self-exploration, the road movie here appears as a genre having a clearly social and ethical dimension: one allowing to bring into focus those who remain

normally unseen or whose markers of otherness (class, ethnicity, race and age) are denied.

While fun and pleasure were central ingredients of the first half, a more serious gaze emerges in the second, eventually connecting Fuser's character to the one evoked by *Heroic Guerrilla* (see Chapter 3). Young Ernesto walks on in silence, immersed in deeper thoughts after chatting with the people he comes across. Several of these encounters were not scripted: road movies imply that the cast and crew travel as well, and the random encounters along the road were used by Salles (Williams 2007: 13). Cinematographically, the film slips into a documentary mode, marked by a handheld camera, and capturing the tragic testimonies of the – mostly indigenous – passers-by on the road: the land deprivation, the lack of protection by the police, the illiteracy, the miserable living circumstances. In his essay on the road movie, Salles not only defined the road movie in terms of resistance, but also underscored the genre's intimate relationship to the documentary genre, stating that '[t]he road movie may well be the film genre that lends itself most naturally to this blurring of boundaries' (Salles 2007: 70).

The shift in cinematographic language coincides with a change in geographic surroundings. After Argentina and the Chilean desert, the friends enter the Andes, and from this point on, they register a qualitative change both in their surroundings and in themselves. This part of the film, in which they meet persons representing the indigenous population of the Americas, brings to mind the journeys of the first discoverers of the continent. It includes a visit to the Machu Picchu in Peru: a historic site which allows for a painful contrast between the former greatness of the pre-Columbian civilisations and the miserable situation of their descendants in present times, who try to forget their hardships and fatigue by chewing coca leaves – a sharp contrast with the hedonistic use of intoxicating products in *Easy Rider* and *On the Road*.

Rather than prolonging tales of conquest, as the US variant of the road movie did, Salles' film is a 'counter-conquest' movie suggesting the devastating effects of the discovery of the Americas.⁸ In this respect, it references an important forerunner in the Latin American film tradition. In 1994, Fernando Solanas released a film on another journey across Latin America by a young person (in this case even a teenager), titled *El viaje/ The Voyage*. Using a more allegorical film language, Solanas baptised his protagonist Martín Nunca [Martin Never], and had him embark on a journey in search of his biological father. As a representative of the New Latin American Cinema movement, Solanas made no effort whatsoever to inscribe his film in road movie's US idiom. On the contrary, *The Voyage* serves to denounce the US and the Latin American governments that indirectly support it. Symbolically, the main character does



Figure 4.2 Fuser writing down his thoughts at Machu Picchu



Figure 4.3 Martín Nunca writing down his thoughts at Machu Picchu in F. Solanas' *The Voyage*

not use a car or motorcycle for travelling, but a bicycle. This form of slow travel – which also characterises the second part of *The Motorcycle Diaries* – already highlights the Bakhtinian dimension of the road, serving as a meeting ground for all kinds of persons. One of these is the allegorical figure ‘Américo inconcluso’ [Unfinished America], whose regular appearance in the film shows that the motif of the Americas is key in Solanas’ film as well. Shot shortly after the commemoration of the discovery of the Americas in 1492, *The Voyage* revisits the notion of conquest and submits it to sharp criticism in order to denounce a process of exploitation that started with colonialism and which – so the film holds – continues until this day.

Though Solanas’ film is much more direct in its criticism than *The Motorcycle Diaries*, Walter Salles pays homage to this forerunner in the scenes shot at Machu Picchu. There is a visual analogy between Fuser writing down his thoughts in his diary at Machu Picchu (see Figure 4.2) and Martín Nunca doing exactly the same thing at the historic site (see Figure 4.3).

Moreover, the achievements of the pre-Columbian civilisations are phrased in almost identical words, even if the condemnation of what happened afterwards is much stronger in Solanas’ film than in the one by Salles (Solanas refers to a ‘monstrous genocide’, while Salles has Guevara wonder how he can feel ‘nostalgia’ for a civilisation he never knew). The evolution of Salles’ film with respect to the road movie genre thus not only implies a move away from the Kerouac model but also a referencing of another, more political, interpretation of the genre, as offered by a representative of the New Latin American Cinema tradition. Salles’ own practice of the road movie is situated at the crossroads of a US tradition and a Latin American one.⁹

Crossing the River

This discussion, however, is not only about genres and mutual influences in film history. It is also about youth and how it is related to them. How does the emergence of a more political, socially conscious use of the road movie impact on the film’s depiction of emerging adulthood? The answer is clear: youth becomes more than a stage in life celebrated in the separate sphere of the heterotopic zone of the road. It becomes a stage on the road of life itself – one that will determine the future path of the protagonist. Similar to other road movie characters, Guevara does not ‘arrive’ in a particular place at the end of the film; the last scene in which he is depicted shows him waving from a plane, as though travelling on. But this life path, marked by a deep restlessness as the one evoked by Kerouac, is oriented by what happened

to him during the travels and the stops he made. What started as a leisure activity during holidays changed into something deeper. Vacation turned into vocation.

As explained in Chapter 1, vocation is not about one's future profession, though the two can coincide or be intensely related. Young Guevara is on his way to become a doctor, and this career choice already contains a social empathy with those who suffer. However, this journey of discovery of the Americas turns into a journey of self-discovery, in which what is at stake is not primarily what he wants to do in life (as a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher), but who he wants to be. It is here where the transformation of the road – from a space of freedom to a space of encounters – announces another one. For the road will become a river.

Shortly after celebrating his birthday at San Pablo, Ernesto takes to the river in a scene obviously meant as the climactic point of the journey. His sportive endeavour of the diary – swimming the Amazon – is granted a transcendental dimension in the script. The dramatic undertone is rendered by suggesting that the swim puts Fuser's life at stake, in an act of self-chosen sacrifice. He is encouraged to keep going by his supporters on the shore (one of them the leper girl he has become friends with), and once he arrives at the other side, the leper patients drag him onto the shore, where he is carried, in a Christ-like way, to a safe place, his body visually merging with theirs in the dark of the night. This is no longer about 'meeting the other'. This is about becoming one of them.

In the same vein, this scene shows that defying death in *The Motorcycle Diaries* is not something one does to get a 'kick' out of it, as happens in *On the Road* when Dean speeds up the car and plays the hair-raising game of eluding the car coming from the opposite direction just in time. Defying death means being prepared to risk it all – even one's own life – for a higher purpose. It stands for a willingness to bear the consequences of a personal choice or an inner calling, in spite of the dangers it may entail, and this personal choice is symbolically expressed as 'choosing sides' in a society characterised by injustice.

As a defining scene, the river symbolises the end of the road for Ernesto or, perhaps, his future. It is striking that when Mial informs him about a job offer from Venezuela he has had, Ernesto reacts in a rather distracted way, gazing intensely at the Amazon, as though the professional interest of his friend, sitting in the cabin, was counterbalanced by the more profound calling he feels awakened in himself. Their Mambo-Tango-raft, a historic present offered to them by the San Pablo residents, is more than a means of transport: it symbolises the way in which they are now 'carried' by this community to move on with what will become their mission. This is not 'easy riding' for they will need the force of their arms to pedal along. But

together with the water's current, the raft will take them to their future on a social mission. Mial will not hesitate when offered the possibility to join his friend in Cuba, as the film informs us in the end, and found the School of Medicine. As for Fuser, his last words – ¡Cuánta injusticia, no! – indicate he will dedicate his life to a new project, one undefined still, but summarised in retrospect by the end credits.

In this respect, the discovery of his vocation implied turning the counter-cultural restlessness of the Kerouac youth into a more directed form of agency, one that illustrates the force of youth to not only explore the Americas, but help it move on. This is where Solanas' allegorical character of 'Américo inconcluso' meets the historic figure of Che Guevara. This is where Kerouac's metaphor of the road as place of unbridled freedom meets Salles' final focus on the river as the place where the life-changing choices are made. These choices echo José Enrique Rodó's vision that youth is not a temporary stage in life, but a source of renewal for society as a whole, particularly in the Americas. Because if the two hippies of *Easy Rider* went looking for America and did not find it anywhere, the travel buddies of *The Motorcycle Diaries* do find it in the end. And by finding it, they find themselves.

General Note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Portuguese and Spanish language source are the author's.

Notes

- 1 Key references on that matter are Moser (2008), Orgeron (2008) and Duarte and Corrigan (2018). For Latin America, see Brandellero (2013), Pinazza (2014), Garibotto and Pérez (2016), Lie (2016) and Lie (2017).
- 2 For a systematic overview of definitions of the genre, see 'Defining the Road Movie' (Lie 2017: 7-15).
- 3 'and my feeling that everything was dead' (Kerouac 2000: 3).
- 4 These points are also mentioned in Tierney's excellent comparison between Kerouac's *On the Road* and Salles' filmic version (2018). She also establishes a parallelism between *The Motorcycle Diaries*' spirit of rebelliousness and Salles' foregrounding of some provocative passages from the scroll (e.g. with respect to homosexuality) (Tierney 2018: 178).
- 5 Foucault's definition runs as follows: 'There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias' (Foucault 1986: 24).
- 6 This section is based on my previous analysis in Lie (2017: 33-42).
- 7 See Pinazza (2014), Lie (2016) and Tierney (2018).

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- 8 This scene clashes with passages in Guevara's diary in which the achievements of the Spanish conquerors in Latin America are praised. For more details, see Chapter 5.
- 9 The same could be argued for *Central Station*, which, similar to *Vidas secas* (dos Santos, 1963) – an iconic film from the Novo Cinema movement of the 1960s – depicts a journey between the Sertão and Rio de Janeiro, only now in the opposite direction.

5 Tourism

In road movies, young people move through space. This space is generally their own country. The purpose of road movies is not to discover a new country, as I explained in the previous chapter; it is to ‘be on the road’. Tourists, on the contrary, are attracted by a destination which to them is new and even exotic. For the viewers of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, this is Latin America. Salles’ film has fostered quite a bit of film-induced tourism – people travelling to certain places under the influence of film.¹ Many of these people are young. This chapter is dedicated to the link between tourism and youth as evoked in *The Motorcycle Diaries*. More specifically, I examine the extent to which the film produces an image of Latin America that plays into the expectations of the tourist traveller – an image that John Urry referred to as the film’s ‘tourist gaze’ (2009).

Tourism, however, cannot be reduced to gazing in a passive manner. It is also about engaging with others and bringing the other senses into play. After discussing tourism as ‘seeing’, the chapter analyses how *The Motorcycle Diaries* draws on tourism as ‘doing’ (such as adventure tourism) and ‘listening’ (music tourism). I will notice that tourism – in its multifaceted form – has had a great influence on Salles’ film. The way in which the director relates to it also shows several shades: from being complicit with tourism to criticising or disrupting it. Before analysing this, I will first comment on tourism as related to Latin America and the historic persona of Che Guevara.

Tourism and Latin America

Latin America’s history with tourism dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, when visitors, especially from the United States, started to feel attracted by the Mexican and Caribbean sun-sea-and-beach combination.² With the exception of a nascent interest in the archaeological sites of the continent, the other parts of Latin America remained virtually unknown to

the wider public, and even to domestic travellers. It was Europe, not Latin America, which constituted the ideal destination for those who could afford it. In Salles' film, this preference is alluded to when a young acquaintance of Chichina's family – obviously the ideal suitor for the upper-class woman – comments on his recent trip to Cambridge and makes the family members sigh with envy. Europe and education are closely connected in this context (Cambridge standing for Europe as well as high education), which relates to the historic origin of the word 'tourism': it is derived from the idea of 'the Grand Tour', a fairly fixed trajectory along historic sites of cultural interest that arose in the late 18th century for young members of the aristocratic class (Feifer 1985: 97). Performing such a tour not only completed their education, but also granted them a form of 'cultural distinction' (Bourdieu 1984), an idea that still exists among young people wanting to see the world before settling down for a particular discipline or job (Snee 2014).

The appearance of the train (and later, the airplane) as a new means of mass transportation, however, allowed new social groups to access such sites under the guidance of travel coaches like Thomas Cook, whose commercial slogan said it all: 'Hurray for the trip, the cheap, cheap trip!' (Urry 2007: 14). As a result, in the 19th century, tourism lost its aura of exclusiveness and became – in the eyes of the aristocratic classes, at least – a 'vulgar' way of displacing oneself in group. The emergence of this democratised form of tourism also saw the birth of 'anti-tourism'. Anti-tourism is based on the alleged difference between, on the one hand, 'easy travelling' – as proposed by people like Thomas Cook – and, on the other hand, the 'morally and culturally elevating form of travel' – as performed by a select group of persons able to overcome difficulties and draw moral strength from this endeavour. It is no coincidence that 'travail' (French for 'work') and 'travel' are etymologically related. Still today, many critical views of tourism draw on a supposed difference with travel as a more pure and authentic form of movement.³

The depreciatory attitude towards tourists was also there in Alta Gracia, in the Argentinean province of Córdoba, where Guevara was raised. It was a small town that lived off-seasonal visitors, especially from Buenos Aires, who were attracted to Alta Gracia because of its healthy climate. Guevara's family had moved there after young Ernesto was diagnosed with asthma at 2 years of age and his complaints diminished once they had moved to the little town. An old school friend and future travel buddy, Carlos Ferrer, refers to their mocking of the Buenos Aires 'tourists' who were lodged at the local hotel (a sumptuous one, as the visitors were well off) and who did not know the area as well as they did (Ferrer 2005: 46). On the other hand, the specific location where Guevara was raised may have sparked his interest in the connection between tourism and health; he regularly comments

on the sanitary conditions of the places he visits and includes leper colonies as stops on his journeys.

Another element is the burgeoning tourist industry in Argentina under Peronism. Tourist figures rose spectacularly during Guevara's youth and Peronist nationalism stimulated Argentine citizens to discover their own country during their holidays (Elena 2010). As the Guevara family was anti-Peronist (they considered it as the Argentine variant of fascism, an ideology from which their Spanish exiled friends had suffered), this particular bias should also be taken into account when assessing Guevara's relation to tourism. For Elena (2010: 44), the fact that Guevara heads for Latin America instead of remaining in his own country could be considered as a way of mocking the contemporary, nationalist inspired form of tourism.

Though tourism was not a major phenomenon in Latin America, this changed in the late 1960s. The post-war appearance of youth culture in Europe and the United States implied a new kind of travel: young people started hitting the road to discover exotic destinations and explore alternative forms of communitarian living. This phenomenon also manifested itself in Latin America, before the eruption of dictatorships would hamper such free movement from the 1970s onwards (Baud and Ypeij 2009: 2). In Argentina, an article from 1970 refers to 'neo-tourism' – a new phenomenon consisting of large groups of young people trekking either to the Patagonian south (where the typical hippie values were celebrated against Patagonia's stereotypical image as a zone of 'strangeness'⁴) or to the north-east of Argentina (where they tried to get in touch with other parts of the population in accordance with their revolutionary ideas) (Manzano 2014: 171). The fact that Che Guevara – by then a martyr for these youngsters – had done the same in his youth was a major influence. Indeed, his 1950 solo motor-trek had taken him through this non-touristic and rather impoverished part of the country.

Guevara was an inspiration to these youngsters not only because of his choice of destination but also because of his manner of travelling. Che predated what would become 'the backpackers' kind of way': extremely low budget, using whatever means of accommodation available (even hospitals and jails) and depicting a picaresque talent for improvisation to survive. More importantly, Che became the model for 'the ideological trip' (Sarlo 2014: 32) – a formative trip in terms of ideology. Getting in touch with the local population, cutting one's way through the jungle to reach remote areas was thought that it would lead to the 'revelation' of some kind of truth about the future to come – some revolutionary insight. This leads me to the following section, which centres on tourism as a particular form of looking and seeing.

Seeing: The Tourist Gaze

Tourism is a multisensorial experience, involving the whole body (think of sunbathing). Nevertheless, John Urry (2009) has famously approached it as a practice that is primordially visual in nature. Historically, tourism's emergence in the 19th century coincided with the invention of photography. One of its key genres is the tourist postcard. On a more abstract level, Urry explained that tourism implies the imposition of a specific form of looking and seeing on the tourist: a 'tourist gaze' directed at things the traveller is supposed to see according to guides and brochures, and that mark out the location visited as 'particular', different from the place called 'home'. Moreover, these 'particular' things are presented as 'extraordinary' in the sense of out of the ordinary, and they correspond to aestheticised versions of reality. One does not travel to see hideous things, but to become enchanted by what one sees, and relive these experiences at home by means of the pictures taken. This intimate connection between tourism and the visual is also suggested in *The Motorcycle Diaries*: Fuser carries along a photo-camera. In the end, some historic pictures not only testify to the authenticity of the journey, but also to the fact that the real Guevara did take pictures, as any tourist would have done. Let us now take a look at the way in which Salles uses the tourist gaze in his account of Guevara's 1952 journey.

A key scene takes place in Machu Picchu – one of Latin America's most iconic tourist sites. Standing between two pillars of the archaeological ruins, Fuser poses for Mial's camera, adding an ironic: 'for posterity' (*para la posteridad*) (see Figure 5.1). This represents the typical tourist activity as described by Urry, the one consisting in taking a picture of a



Figure 5.1 Fuser has his picture taken by his travel buddy Mial

location superficially known beforehand (particularly through books: cf. ‘the Americas we knew from books only’) and demonstrating (for oneself and the people at home) that one has indeed ‘been there’. But at the same time, this scene already shows a tension between what is considered worth seeing by the travellers at the moment when the picture is taken and what is considered noteworthy by Salles as the audience’s contemporary. Indeed, ‘para la posteridad’ connects the scene to the moment in which we are looking at the scene. The abstract future referred to by the young travellers is already there – we are ‘the posterity’. What we see in this picture is not so much Machu Picchu, but a man behaving like an ordinary tourist, though he will become a future hero. What is at stake here is not just the image of an ancient monument, but the image of Guevara himself.

Another iconic moment takes place somewhat earlier in the film, when Fuser and Mial pay a visit to a Chilean market. Unfamiliar with some of the products, they ask the vendors questions (what fish is this? And what is that?). One of the vendors proudly showcases a Chilean fish to Fuser (see Figure 5.2), who takes a picture with his camera (see Figure 5.3). The vendor later on reappears in the film in black and white (see Figure 5.4). This scene reflects another function of the tourist gaze, which consists of carving out ‘the peculiar’ at certain spots (in this case, as identified by the travellers on the spot). Here, it is not Guevara who is posing in the picture to demonstrate that he has been there. The image rather works as ‘a souvenir’ of the trip, something indicated by the time lapse between the moment of taking the picture and the one in which it is displayed in the film. This is a visual memory of a foreign country portrayed in a metonymical way – through a particular object, in a *pars-pro-toto* relation. But once again, there is an interesting treatment of this picture in the film. At the point when it is supposedly taken by Fuser, it directs attention to the peculiarities at the Chilean market. In the end, however, it directs attention to the ‘vendor’ as ‘*pars pro toto*’ of the American family with whom Guevara now identifies. In other words, the relationship between ‘the peculiar and exotic’, on the one hand, and ‘the familiar and recognizable’, on the other hand, changes over the course of the film. And this precisely illustrates the film’s negotiation with ‘the tourist gaze’: what is considered ‘exotic’ at first becomes ‘normal’ later on. In this way, the film tries to bring us closer to what appears as exotic at first.

The film’s use of the tourist gaze can also be understood through the ways in which Fuser and Mial’s ‘internal’ tourist gaze can be linked to the film’s overall ‘mode of address’ (Podalsky 2016), the ways in which it tells the story, which is also built on the deployment of a tourist gaze. Indeed, not only Guevara, the young traveller, carries along a camera, Salles himself carries one. And he also decides to include certain sceneries and objects, and others not.



Figure 5.2 Chilean vendor showing a fish to Fuser



Figure 5.3 Fuser takes a picture of the scene



Figure 5.4 The picture becomes a mental souvenir

An important remark in this respect arises from a comparison between the travel diaries and the film. In spite of Guevara's alleged 'anti-tourism', Alberto Granado and Ernesto Guevara did spend some time at beach resorts in Argentina.⁵ This part is eliminated from the movie. There may be various reasons for this, but the effect is that an iconic place of tourism as an international, universal practice has disappeared in favour of views that will be experienced, by a foreign audience, as typically 'Latin American': the grandiose lake between Chile and Argentina, the mountains of the Andes, the Atacama desert, the historic city of Cuzco besides the archaeological site of Machu Picchu. The fact that the travellers seem to be alone in these sites marks these images out as 'romantic' within the wider category of the tourist gaze:

With what we call the romantic gaze, solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze are emphasized. In such cases, tourists expect to look at the object privately or at least only with significant others [...] The romantic gaze involves further quests for new objects of the solitary gaze, the deserted beach, the empty hilltop, the uninhabited forest, the uncontaminated mountain stream and so on. Notions of the romantic gaze are endlessly used in marketing and advertising tourist sites, especially with the 'West'. (Urry and Larsen 2011: 19)

The romantic element of these scenes is heightened by the postcard-like quality of the images. They show us wide views of a particular landscape or townscape, provided with the name of the location and the date on which the travel buddies passed through it (see Figure 5.5). The touristic quality of the images is underscored by two aspects: they are panoramic and they are aestheticised. The first aspect places the onlooker in an imaginary position of visual empowerment: they dominate the spectacle, embracing with one sight an extended area. The second aspect relates to the hedonistic dimension of tourism: the sight is meant to produce delight, admiration, awe.

In this second respect, however, one notices an important shift. The first postcard-like image shows us the beautiful summer residence of Chichina's relatives in Miramar. It is an impressive mansion surrounded by impeccable and extended green grass fields. The view is aestheticised and suggests the wealth of this family without any social or political commentary. This kind of postcard-like images, however, stop when the travellers arrive in Lima. The sight of Lima – though still rendered in a postcard-like way – is explicitly presented as non-aesthetic by Fuser's voiceover who wonders, with indignation, how 'a civilisation that was capable of producing this:



Figure 5.5 Postcard-like image

[sight of Machu Picchu]' could also ever have been replaced by another one that produces the site we are seeing, Lima (see Figures 5.6 and 5.7).

Rather than letting the eye dwell passively over the sight presented, the viewer is encouraged to take a critical distance from it. Another way in which the tourist curiosity is re-situated with respect to the rest of the story is noticeable in the part on Valparaíso. Known for its hilltops and spectacular funicular system, Valparaíso is a Chilean tourist spot incorporated into Salles' film. However, what should have been foregrounded from a tourist point of view – the funicular system – is used as a simple background to the main story. Che's depression after Chichina's sentimental break-up is visually expressed as a descent into one of Valparaíso's tunnels with the funicular.

Reversing the Gaze

The most significant way in which the typical tourist postcards are counter-balanced, however, is with the series of images in black and white. Those images represent the souvenirs which Fuser keeps in his camera, but also in his mind. They start popping up at a particular moment in the film, when



Figure 5.6 Postcard-like view of Machu Picchu

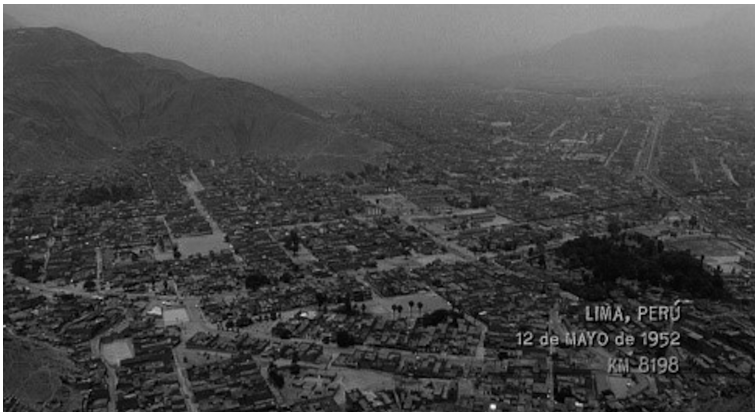


Figure 5.7 The postcard de-aestheticised: Lima

Guevara is reading a book by the Peruvian-Marxist essay-writer Mariátegui (see Chapter 2) (see Figures 5.8 and 5.9).

These are not 'normal' tourist pictures, then, because once the trip is over, they will not be looked at again; instead they will be used during the trip itself. The deeper meaning of these mental pictures unfolds some time after they were taken, under the effect of new encounters (Dr. Pesce) and new readings (Mariátegui 2007). From originally being mere anecdotal souvenirs, they become eye-openers to a new reality. This reality is not meant to please the viewer, but relates to the existence of another Latin America,

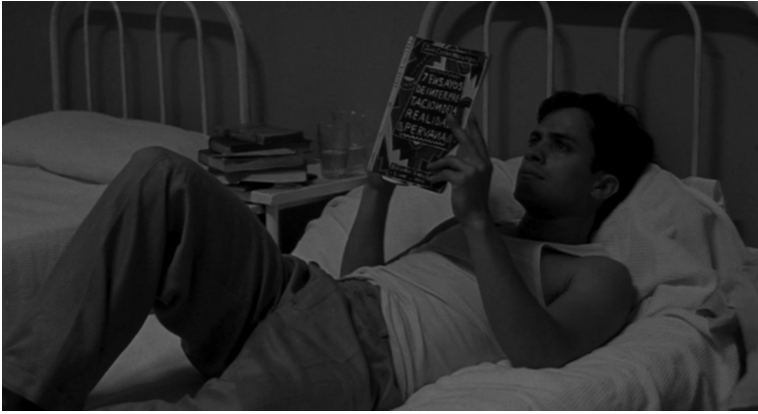


Figure 5.8 Fuser reads Mariátegui



Figure 5.9 Black-and-white images pop up in Fuser’s mind

characterised by social inequality. By inserting these mental souvenirs into a wider series of images that is depicted in the end, they become interchangeable, pointing at a larger, continent-wide group of persons who exemplify ‘the people’ of Latin America (*el pueblo*). Here, this word does not refer to all inhabitants of Latin America, but only to the ones living in modest to poor conditions as a result of a system of social exclusion or oppression. Indeed, instead of Chichina, the Von Putkamers, Dr. Pesce or the Chilean women who invited the buddies for a drink, we see market vendors, farmers

and workers in the Anaconda mining site. This is a social group of lower-class people, staring into the camera with serious, almost tragic expressions.

Interestingly, they are not depicted as real portraits, for we see them breathing while a number of objects and animals move in the background (a horse shaking its head, a funicular descending). Rather than pictures, these portraits correspond to 'moving stills'. Their moving quality implies that a fundamental aspect of the typical tourist picture or postcard is disrupted. While tourist postcards normally place the onlooker in the position of a subject, empowering them through the panoramic sight offered by the image or by the fact that the people gazed at appear as objects, these mental pictures break down the normal subject-object division by gazing back at us. Contrary to the postcard-like landscapes which rely on the production of a tourist gaze, these souvenirs and mental images in black and white reverse the tourist gaze.

In this context, it is important to mention that Walter Salles has acknowledged Martín Chambi's (1891–1973) influence on his film (James 2004: 8–9). This Peruvian photographer of indigenous descent, based in Cuzco, specialised in portraits of the well-off as well as postcards for the incipient tourist industry in Peru. While being embedded in European modernity through the use of a camera, Chambi's photographic practice also questions this modernity by displaying a set of 'counter-hegemonic strategies' (Coronado 2009: 156). This can be seen clearly in his portrait of a man on a fancy motorcycle that is nonetheless located in a dusty God-forsaken town; or in a photograph of a splendidly dressed bride, standing above the stairs of her sumptuous house while a mysterious indigenous woman stares at us from the dark, sitting in a rocking chair.

In Salles' film, one notices such a particular use of a background-foreground dynamic in the scene in Valparaíso, earlier referred to: the tourist object is incorporated there as mere background to the major storyline. The moving stills can be considered as another example of a counter-hegemonic strategy with respect to conventional tourist discourse in the sense that the mental pictures reverse the gaze of the traditional tourist, silently questioning us and our comfortable position as viewers from other worlds and other classes. Another artist completes the meaning of this final series of mental images: Sebastião Salgado (1944–) – a Brazilian photographer whose influence also was acknowledged by Salles (James 2004: 8–9). His series of black and white portraits assembled in *Outros Americas* ([Other Americas], 1986) and *Workers* (1993) won international prizes and travelled the world. Salgado's name became a key reference for a tradition of social photography in Latin America (and beyond) to which the moving stills of Salles pays homage.

Doing: Adventure Tourism

According to Urry, tourists are looking for extraordinary things to gaze upon. But tourists, especially, young ones, are also looking for extraordinary things to do. This has given rise to a phenomenon called ‘adventure tourism’ (Beames et al. 2019), a form of travel that thrives on kicks and challenges in remote locations. Guevara’s 1952 journey clearly relates to it. In the film, Fuser and Mial ironically describe themselves as ‘adventurers’, longing to explore new countries and bring back new fruits, and this word also pops up regularly in the travel diaries.⁶ In fact, the whole enterprise of travelling across Latin America on an old motorcycle is presented as a challenge: something profoundly new and implying strength, endeavour and wit to survive. Adventure is also related to the way in which young Guevara travelled:

In those days, distances were far; it was terribly difficult, expensive and burdensome to travel. Travel was only for those with enough money and time to do it. But Ernesto, of course, had invented a new way of travelling, carrying hardly anything at all, thumbing rides, sleeping wherever and eating whatever he managed to scrape up. Today, after the hippy culture, after the youth revolutions of the 60s and 70s, this may seem very commonplace, but at the time it was an odyssey! (Ferrer 2005: 19)

Besides the long motorcycle journey – a form of ‘sports’ promoted at the time by the so-called ‘raiderista clubs’ and even by Perón himself (Manzano 2014: 25) – engaging in hazardous, risky things belongs to the adventure paradigm. This includes trying to fool others: both the anniversary ritual – designed to acquire free food and wine – and the posing as ‘experts in leprology’ for a local newspaper can be placed in this category. Such tricks are presented as strategies to survive for vagabonds on a limited budget. Simultaneously, adventure tourism is generally lived in full nature, inciting the young (especially male) tourist to explore nature in a physically demanding way. And thus, in its immediate aftermath, the 1952 journey turned Guevara into a local hero: someone who had swum the Amazon and descended it on a raft. When he returned, Guevara wrote to his mother he had the feeling of having been around the world twice, referring to Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872) – an adventure novel he had devoured in his youth.

In Salles’ film, now, this adventure paradigm is gradually abandoned in favour of a social awakening. For, indeed, adventurers travel light and in sometimes dire circumstances but they do this because they want to. The

challenge consists in the temporary abandonment of the privileged conditions which mark their daily lives. In *The Motorcycle Diaries*, by contrast, the experience of the journey leads to an awareness regarding the social privileges which the travel buddies enjoy when they are not vacationing. As a result, the swimming and rafting experiences appear to be something completely different, no longer climaxes of the adventurous side of the journey, but activities related to a social message. Swimming is not represented in the film as a hedonistic kick for the self, as it was in the diaries, but as a symbolic activity directed at the Other. As for the rafting, the activity itself is hardly presented, rather the emphasis is on the goodbye scene and the fact that the Mambo Tango was a gift from the community.

Doing: From Cultural Tourism to Voluntourism

Adventure tourism is not the only way in which tourism shows itself to be connected to ‘doing’. Another form consists in the active exploration of foreign cultures (visiting museums, discovering local cuisine). Such ‘cultural tourism’ – the kind of tourism in which the cultural heritage, both past and present, stands central – is strongly connected to European destinations, but the concept is also relevant to Latin America, where it tends to refer to the continent’s pre-Columbian heritage and the diversity of indigenous customs and habits (Baud and Ypeij 2009: 4). In *The Motorcycle Diaries*, the visits to Machu Picchu and Cuzco illustrate the first form; a conversation with quechua women in Peru exemplifies the second.

Interestingly, instead of depicting them as objects of photography, Salles restores to the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas their ability to speak and act as subjects. Thus, a quechua boy serves Fuser and Mial as a guide in the archaeological site of Cuzco, and quechua women explain to the travellers their religious practices in their own words and their own language (see Figure 5.10). The sacred character of the coca leaves they consume is brought into focus and will provide a sharp contrast with the hedonistic consumption of drugs in Salles’ later film, *On the Road*. The word ‘Sacsayhuamán’ pops up in the quechua formulas – a reference to the citadel on the archaeological site that connects the women directly to the ancient civilisation. Fuser and Mial respectfully take part in the ritual (‘with both hands, Néstor!’) and they show genuine interest by asking questions with the help of a bilingual member of the group of women.

Cultural questions alternate with more social ones, not only in this scene but also when the friends’ path crosses the one of an indigenous farmer in the Andes: How does he earn his money having been chased from his property? How many children does he have? Contrary to the travel notes, which



Figure 5.10 Conversation with indigenous women

ignore the indigenous inhabitants of Latin America or refer to them in a derogatory way (comparing them to animals, for instance),⁷ the film draws attention to their continued suffering since colonial times. In this respect as well, Salles performs an ideological twist on the passages regarding colonialism in the travel diary. The historical Guevara certainly admired the achievements of the pre-Columbian civilisation, but equally expressed his admiration for ‘the formidable courage of the warriors who conquered the region in the name of Spain’ (Guevara 2004a: 104).

But there are still other forms of ‘doing’ in tourist contexts. Thus, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara has been presented as the emblematic example of the ‘political tourist’ (Moynagh 2008), a person visiting a foreign country out of political interest and often taking on some form of temporary practical commitment, as when, during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), internationalists fought at the side of the Republicans. Guevara’s political tourism is shown through his active participation in the Cuban Revolution, as well as his earlier decision to include Bolivia and Guatemala – two countries where an Agrarian Reform Law had been voted – in his second journey across the Americas. Such political interest is absent from his travel notes on the 1952 journey, however. When Granado and Guevara notice a revolution is brewing in Colombia, for instance, they decide to leave it on the spot⁸ and when questioned about ‘Peronism’ – a ‘new’ political system at the time – they provide the answer which they believe to be best suited their interlocutor’s favour.⁹ Nor does Salles infuse his filmic version of the journey with political references – the few comments on Peronism in the diaries are eliminated from the film.

One might, however, consider political tourism as the result of a cross-border identification originating, in Guevara's case, from a cross-class identification. It is to this last phenomenon that I would like to refer with the word 'social tourism': the occasional peeping into the living conditions of another – generally lower – class. Social tourism is already there in Guevara's 1950 solo motor-trek across the north-east of Argentina and also appears during his 1952 journey. Clearly, Guevara and Granado were not looking for 'poverty', but inevitably they came across it, and Salles' film highlights Fuser's interest in these conditions. Thus, just when the friends are about to leave with two Chilean dates, Fuser responds to an urgent request to attend to a dying old lady (Mial protests and does not accompany him). The miserable conditions in which Fuser finds the old woman dying (alone, no doctor nor medicine) are shown to have an impact on young Ernesto (he donates his medicine to her). On other occasions, his interest in the social conditions of others is revealed through the questions he asks: 'why did they expel you?' (to the miner's couple), 'how many children do you have?' (to the Peruvian farmer). The visit to the copper mine at Chuquicamata can also be included in this category.

The social tourism during the journey prepares for the depiction in Salles' film of what is nowadays referred to as 'voluntourism': the visit to a – generally foreign – location in combination with practical aid to the community visited. As Borland and Adams (2013) explain, voluntourism relies on the principle that the 'guest' who is received also offers specific services to his host, and that this service is not only useful for his host community, but also enriching and potentially transformative for the person engaging in it. For this last reason, voluntourism often occurs in the context of studies of higher education or an NGO. It appeals to students or young graduates with an adventurous and idealist mind, desirous to acquire some form of significant experience abroad that may complement their (often intellectualist) training at home. Guevara and Granado's activities in the leper colony can be associated, from a contemporary perspective, with voluntourism: they are given lodgings and food by the community, in the middle of the Amazonian jungle, and help out as medical students and recent graduates, attending to the leper patients, but also engaging with them in other ways through conversation, practical activities (such as building houses) and sports (football). Though the political tourism is left out of the picture, it is clear that the form of 'voluntourism' shown in *San Pablo* paves the way for it. It is based on a 'cosmopolitan affect' (Borland and Adams 2013: 3): the capacity to become affected by other people beyond national borders, and temporarily abandon the passive, 'gazing' attitude in favour of a practical engagement with the deprived.

Listening: Music Tourism

Besides offering beautiful landscapes, moving portraits and suggesting the possibility of engaging in extraordinary activities (adventurous and otherwise), *The Motorcycle Diaries* also presents some kind of musical tour across the continent. The importance of music can already be derived from the fact that the film ends with a programmatic song summarising the main message of the film. Written and performed by Uruguayan artist Jorge Drexler (1964–), the Oscar-winning song is entitled ‘At the Other Side of the River’ and connects to the symbolic swim across the Amazon. The presence of music tourism in the film, however, rather relates to the way in which music – and sounds – participates in the ‘transportation’ of the viewer to the different locations visited (Bolderman 2020). This acoustic, musical journey is mainly the work of the extradiegetic musical score as provided by world-renowned composer Gustavo Santaolalla (1951–). It is matched throughout by a choice of historic musical pieces that – together with Santaolalla’s music – help produce an image of Latin America as a destination not only intriguing for the sublime sights it offers and the extraordinary things it allows one to do, but which is also an attractive region for the music and sounds it produces. This section starts with a presentation of Santaolalla’s music and then dedicates some attention to the period music in the film.

Santaolalla

As an artist who had explored very different genres in his musical career – from rock music in the 1960s to folklore and Latin music in the subsequent decades – Santaolalla had a wide range of musical repertoires at his disposal.¹⁰ Considering ‘rock’ as the international folk music of ‘youth’ (Santaolalla 2020), the electric guitar emerges in some parts of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, especially to express energy (in the beginning) and protest (towards the end). However, for a film taking place in Latin America and describing a young person’s awakening to the cultural identity of his continent, Santaolalla drew inspiration from the period in which he experimented with the folk music of his country and the Andean region. As a guitarist, he also composed folk music himself and became a fan of the ‘ronroco’, a small guitar typical of the southern region of Latin America to which he dedicated a series of compositions. It inspired his album *Ronroco* (1998), which also provided the central musical score of *The Motorcycle Diaries*: ‘From Ushaia to la Quiaca’. The place names in this title refer to the most southern and most northern points of a tour he made in the 1970s with his band across Argentina to gather more insight in the country’s folk

music and record musical pieces in situ. This music is used as musical background to the series of black and white ‘souvenirs’ on which the film ends. In addition to foregrounding Latin America through the use of the ronroco as an idiosyncratic instrument, the melody is a strong companion to the visual series; its repetitive character enforces the idea of a series of interchangeable pictures, and the upward melodious sounds produce an inquisitive effect, in a friendly manner. While the ‘moving stills’ simply state that these people are there, the music seems to formulate an open question to the viewer: How do we relate to these people? Which ethical responses do their faces imply on our part?

Ronroco is also the album that inaugurated Santaolalla’s entrance into the world of films: Michael Mann used another piece on this album – ‘Iguazú’ – for his suspense thriller *The Insider* (1999), thereby illustrating the adaptability of this instrumental music to other media beyond the specific reference to Latin America. In fact, Santaolalla’s music has a strongly transnational dimension to it: Iguazú was also used for the Mexican box office hit *Love’s a Bitch* (1999) and a few years after Santaolalla won an Oscar for his film music for *Babel* (2006) – perhaps the most famous transnational film from Latin America – and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

In the other musical parts of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, one notices the use of instruments that punctuate the transition into other countries. Thus, the guitar dominates in Argentina (see the energising almost Western-like guitar chords when the travel partners embrace the Argentine pampa on their motorcycles), the flute is added in Chile (suggesting a sense of freedom, but also reminiscent of the Chilean pan flute) and the drums accompany the travellers during their crossing of the Amazon river – shortly after, we see Granado taking part in some improvised ‘drum concert’ in the leper community. The other person beating the drums is a black leper patient, a reference to the racial mixture of Latin America as also expressed in the musical richness accompanying the film.

Period Music

The period music is linked to the dancing scenes, which will be discussed in Chapter 6, dedicated to the body. However, it is important to state, in this case, that the dances accompany the production of musical diversity in the film, each country being evoked through specific musical pieces that are generally also connected to specific dances. Thus, the film opens with Alberto humming the first verses of ‘Adios muchachos’, a famous Argentine tango referring to an imminent departure.¹¹ In Chile, we attend an amusing dance party where a live orchestra performs ‘Chipi chipi’ – a guaracha dance from Cuba that nevertheless, through the similarity of its first

syllables, also connects to Chile.¹² In San Pablo, finally, the travellers and medical staff dance to mambo music, exported from the Caribbean. Tango and mambo are musical icons of Latin America and operate as ‘acoustic bridges’ (D’Lugo 2016: 53–71) to the international audience watching these scenes. Interestingly, all musical pieces belong to the commercialised Latin American music of the 1950s, which crossed national borders. Thus, the dance music ‘Delicado’,¹³ played in Chichina’s house, travelled from Brazil to other countries, becoming an international hit – it was even recently rediscovered, thanks to Martin Scorsese’s *The Irishman* (2019), and ‘Chipi chipi’ spread from the Caribbean to other countries. The period music then expresses, just like Santaolalla’s music, the specificity of Latin America as musical continent, producing both an impression of diversity and local specificity and a transnational, global effect. To the audience at home, it offers the possibility, thanks to the availability of *The Motorcycle Diaries*’ music on albums and Spotify, to ‘relive’ the journey acoustically, travelling from one place to another.

Conclusion

It is ironic, perhaps, that Guevara – who wanted to turn his back on the tourism of his time – inspired a movie so strongly indulging in tourist sites and sounds. But here it is crucial to recall that tourism and anti-tourism are two sides of the same coin and therefore deeply related. Moreover, tourism is a multifaceted activity, implying hedonistic as well as social activities of various kinds. The most challenging idea of the film is, perhaps, that tourism – often seen as a capitalist activity par excellence – is not at odds with forms of solidarity and social commitment. One can precede the other, opening up the traveller’s eyes to new realities. In this sense, tourism can become ‘disruptive’ (Veijola et al. 2014) of existing conceptions regarding society. It invites people to hit the road, for whichever reason, and along this road, new experiences and encounters can stimulate the traveller to exchange old values for new ones.

This positive appraisal softens the more critical conclusion to which Eduardo Elena comes after studying Guevara’s tourist practices. Indeed, this scholar asserts: ‘Guevara’s trajectory ran counter to the conventional wisdom about travel: the more he journeyed, the less he apparently saw and the more his outlook on the world became reduced’ (Elena 2010: 47–48). Rather than opening up his eyes, then, Guevara became gradually blinded by his own ideas according to Elena, projecting them onto the new realities he found until it turned him into a martyr of his own revolution. But then again, the field of tourism studies teaches us that one always hits the road with preconceived ideas regarding what there is to find in the foreign

destination – be these ideas commercial or political. What marks out Ernesto as a ‘young’ traveller in this particular journey, according to Salles, rather is his ability to change the way he looks at things. This change is described within the very tourist discourse Salles draws upon: with respect to the tourist gaze itself (reversing it), with respect to adventure tourism as appealing to individuals out for a personal challenge and becoming transformed under the effect of ‘voluntourism’. For a film so deeply preoccupied with cultural identity, tourism is an unavoidable, but also stretchable notion: one that allows drawing viewers into a film, but also encourages them to change their minds.

General Note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Portuguese and Spanish language source are the author’s.

Notes

- 1 The relationship between *The Motorcycle Diaries* and film-induced tourism is confirmed by Williams (2007: 27) and Shani et al. (2009).
- 2 The following is a summary of Baud and Ypeij (2009) and Jackiewicz and Klak (2012). For more specific information on tourism in Mexico, see Berger (2006) and Lindsay (2019).
- 3 See Culler (1981) on the artificial character of this distinction.
- 4 See the books on Patagonia by Paul Theroux and Bruce Chatwin.
- 5 See Granado (2003: 5-9) and Guevara, ‘the discovery of the ocean’ (2004a: 34-5).
- 6 E.g., ‘We had come to a new phase in our adventure’ (Guevara 2004a: 67).
- 7 E.g., ‘At a weary, steady pace, they trotted along like lamas’ (Guevara 2004a: 95); ‘the somewhat animal-like concept the indigenous have of modesty and hygiene’ (116).
- 8 ‘it seems a revolution may be brewing [...] we’re getting out of here as soon as we can’ (Guevara 2004a: 157).
- 9 E.g., ‘He began to ask us all about “the wonderful land of Peron”. Our imaginations ignited [...], it was easy for us to pain extraordinary events’ (Guevara 2004a: 95).
- 10 For an in-depth overview, see Karush (2016).
- 11 The song was composed in 1927 by Argentinian pianist Julio César Sanders and Argentinian poet César Vedani.
- 12 A guaracha dance is characterised by its comic, picaresque lyrics.
- 13 The music was composed in 1952 by the Brazilian musician Valdir Azevedo and became Latin America’s hit of the year.

6 Body Politics

When hitting the road in 1952, Ernesto Guevara is not only a young man in his 20s. He is also a medical student and an asthma patient. Such references highlight the importance of the body in this film. In a way, Salles adds, to the famous portrait of Guevara, the rest of his body. This is not an innocent gesture: it implies engaging with the moral and political meanings ascribed onto Guevara's body as an ideologically charged entity. For, indeed, Guevara's contribution to revolutionary thinking very much emphasised the importance of being fit and prepared to sacrifice one's own life for the Revolution. 'Poner el cuerpo' [to put one's body on the line] was the way in which revolutionaries referred to this key aspect of Guevara's legacy: one had to be willing to give one's own body to the revolutionary cause instead of keep theorising about it.¹ This was, so the Cuban revolutionary claimed, the lesson of the Cuban Revolution, condensed in the mythical image of a mere dozen of survivors of a shipwrecked journey from Mexico to Cuba, who nevertheless succeeded in bringing a revolution to victory. If they could do it, anyone could. Or at least, this is what was believed. The body thus became all important to the revolutionary movement that spread around Guevara, not only as an instrument to 'make' the revolution, but also as a carrier of moral and political values. It is with these values that Salles' film engages when adding a body to a head. It is here where the political dimension of his film is to be located. Let us therefore take a look at the way in which bodies – and especially Guevara's body – are portrayed in the film.

The Desirous Body

'You don't want to end like that, do you, Fuser?' Mial asks this question in the film while pointing at a middle-aged man who has fallen asleep behind his glass of wine in the midst of the day, his large belly and unattractive face suggesting the corrosive effects of a life wasted by boredom (see Figure 6.1). Bidding farewell to youth equals bidding farewell to a fit and



Figure 6.1 The body of a middle-aged man suggests the boredom of conventional adulthood

youthful body: ‘Perhaps it’s time to grow a belly’, is what Alberto melancholically says while considering a job offer in Caracas towards the end of the film. Youth is not just a state of mind, then, it is primarily a state of a body. A body meant for pleasure and activities of whichever kind: sports, dancing, adventure, sex. All of these activities are displayed throughout the film: Fuser’s name is derived from his energetic way of playing rugby² and towards the end of the film, the travel friends are shown taking part in a football match. There is dancing in Argentina, Chile and Peru that allows the body indirectly to engage with the opposite sex, often serving as a prelude to physical intimacy (Alberto with the Argentine maid, Fuser with the Chilean mechanic’s wife). And adventure tourism implies facing all kinds of bodily challenges: from pushing a motorcycle uphill on a snow-covered mountain to walking extensive distances on foot across the Atacama desert. Interestingly, riding a motorcycle was also presented as a way of practising sports, particularly in the context of ‘raiderismo’: a word derived from ‘riding’ and a suggestion of the confrontation with wild and open terrains to test out own’s skills at driving.³ Perón himself drove a motorcycle and encouraged youngsters (men and women) to practise the motorcycle sports.⁴ As for the sex, explicit scenes are absent from the film, but there are several allusions to Alberto’s womanising activities and Fuser is shown making out with Chichina in a car at the family’s property.

The body is then a source of delight, but it is also a source of suffering; the travel friends are hungry, feel cold, become physically exhausted. As I discussed in Chapter 5, ‘adventure tourism’ requires such suffering as

a self-chosen challenge. The travel diaries indicate that Guevara and his friends could always rely on their families for financial support, but they took pride in making as little use of this possibility as they could (in the film, we nevertheless see Alberto rejoicing over the money sent to Ernesto in a letter from his mother). In the case of Ernesto, the money he received from Chichina to buy her a bathing suit in Miami becomes a running motif illustrating his ability to resist physical adversity: he systematically declines Alberto's suggestion to spend the 15 dollars on a hot meal or some extra medicine when they most need it. Endurance and resilience are highlighted in young Guevara's body, foreshadowing Che's ability to suffer as guerrilla and demand the same attitude from his fellow comrades. The young body was not just a condition from birth: it needed to be steeled at will by training and an ascetic lifestyle.⁵ Such qualities are foregrounded in Fuser's body by playing out the contrast with Mial, who clearly leans towards a more hedonistic interpretation of youth.

That said, Ernesto's body is not only young, it is also gendered, and Ernesto is not immune to the charms of the opposite sex. When Chichina (whose request for a new bathing suit accentuates the femininity of her body) shows off her naked back and shoulders during a dance, Ernesto compares himself to a pirate longing to steal a diamond. In Chile, Ernesto is clearly attracted to a Chilean woman who fancies him, as indicated by his refusal to back off when her husband awakens, Fuser's senses having been sexually aroused by the booze and the woman's flirty attitude. In both scenes, the dance music – original pieces of period music from the 1950s – underscores the sexual attraction between the gendered bodies: in Chichina's vacation house, the tango 'Mala Junta' refers to the 'bad company' [*mala junta*] that may lead a decent woman astray.⁶ In Chile, the 'Chipi' music – a guaracha originating from Cuba – gives a double, erotic meaning to the train and other means of transport recommended for a honeymoon (the intermittent cheerful shouts: 'gózala' [enjoy her, enjoy her] referring both to the transport and to the female body). Even though the game of seduction does not produce the desired effect (the two Argentines end up being chased by a furious crowd), Ernesto emerges visually invigorated from the experience – as his buddy had predicted when catching a glimpse of Fuser on the dance floor with the woman: 'Ah, now you suddenly remember you are a man, don't you, Ernesto?'

Masculinity is at stake, then, as it generally is when travels by young men are described (Thurnell-Read and Casey 2014). At the same time, the masculine side of Fuser is somewhat compromised by his clumsy dancing (preventing him from taking the lead), and choosing Gael García Bernal to represent him indirectly taints Fuser's character with the more fluid form of sexuality the Mexican actor became associated with because of films

like *And your mother too* (Cuarón 2002) and *Bad education* (Almodóvar 2004).⁷ What is more, we notice a clear evolution in the gendered depiction of Fuser's body in the course of the film. In the third dance scene in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, which takes place during the birthday party in San Pablo, the gendered attraction between the sexes is neutralised by the fact that the female side is represented by nuns. Somewhat earlier, Salles constructs a contrast between Alberto, who is in great sexual need because of a Peruvian call girl on the boat, and Ernesto, who could not care less. Interestingly, the travel diaries inform us that both slept with the sex worker⁸ but Salles eliminates Ernesto's part in this sexual episode to throw into relief the character's inner evolution in bodily terms: from a gendered desirous body in the first part of the film, he becomes a neutralised one in the second. This neutral, non-marked bodily identity makes him able to identify with other human beings, independently of gender, ethnicity or class. In order to prepare for this identification, the body in *The Motorcycle Diaries* not only appears as fit, young and desirous: it also appears as vulnerable.

The Vulnerable Body

The term 'vulnerability' in this context does not refer to the suffering caused by the temporary setbacks of a challenging journey. As mentioned earlier, adventure tourism implies one willingly accepts the strains that will be imposed on the body, knowing that one has the possibility of opting in or out of the experience when things get rough (which is what Alberto proposes to do when his motorcycle breaks down: 'es humanamente imposible' [it is impossible for human beings]). There is a calculated risk, then, but this does not equal vulnerability. The notion of 'vulnerability' refers to an essential quality of the human body as demanding attention and care by others.⁹ This quality is especially noticeable at one's birth and during old age – episodes in life when one depends on the mother or other care-takers to survive – but the condition remains present in all stages of life, as occasional sickness or other health problems remind one of. Vulnerability is not to be conceived as a negative dimension of human life, however; it is what constitutes a person in a fundamental way, providing the basis for an ethical, humanist engagement with others. Once a person realises they fundamentally depend upon others, they will engage with others differently. This aspect is key to Salles' film and is especially foregrounded through his depiction of the medical side of the trip.

This side is introduced from the very beginning of the film: while preparing his backpack, Ernesto prepares his inhaler and reaches for a set of insulin flasks. Guevara's biographers testify to his endeavour to never let his asthma limit him.¹⁰ This attitude is illustrated in the next scene, in which

we see him playing rugby – a sport his father says was not recommended to asthma patients¹¹ – and briefly interrupting his play to puff some extra oxygen in his lungs. Just as they are about to depart, Ernesto's mother urges Alberto to take good care of her son ('If anything happens to him, I'll come and find you!'), not only because he is older than Ernesto, but also because Ernesto's body is more vulnerable than his.

Fuser's dependency on Alberto for medical care is illustrated on the Amazon boat that takes them to San Pablo: the look of the suffocating Ernesto, twisting himself in all directions under the effect of a severe asthma attack, frightens the bystanders by his deadly gasps and spasms, but Alberto instantly brings relief injecting insulin into his tormented young friend. Even before, in the first part of the film, Ernesto's physical vulnerability is highlighted: after shooting a flying duck out of the air, he is pressed by Alberto to go and dive for it in a cold lake, and catches a very bad cold, verging on pneumonia. His suffering body is shown clung to Alberto's and wrapped in an extra blanket, as though he were a child being carried on Alberto's back. In other words, Fuser's young body is depicted as fit and vulnerable at the same time – an ambivalence that contradicts any stereotyped heroic portrayal. The same ambivalence is found in his double position in medical terms: he is patient and doctor at the same time. Just before he catches the severe cold, Ernesto had diagnosed a tumour in the neck of a German migrant in Patagonia. His medical gaze here reflects the clinical detachment that is required from a doctor to tell his patient the truth, even in detriment of his own interests and indeed, they are refused shelter after bringing the bad message – something which the more diplomatic Alberto had anticipated.

In a subsequent scene, however, we notice that this 'cold', medical gaze is combined with a form of humanist care, based on a sense of shared suffering. I am referring to Ernesto's visit to the old, dying lady he is asked to examine during his days in Chile (see Chapter 5). The difference with respect to the previous scene resides not only in the social condition of the patients (one is well off, the other is living in miserable circumstances), but also in the deeper connection portrayed between Fuser and the patient. What Salles' camera suggests is that something 'touches' Fuser in this scene: the sight of her extreme vulnerability and the awareness that she is an asthma patient (on top of her heart condition). Their connectedness is illustrated by Ernesto sharing part of his own medicine to temporarily alleviate her discomfort. The reflection he adds in his travel diaries (from which the scene contains a literal quotation) underscores the fragility of life: 'only a month ago this poor woman was still earning her living her life as a waitress, wheezing and panting but facing life with dignity' (Guevara 2004a: 70). Slipping from one position to another can happen overnight,

which is why one really need to be able to rely on others. In other words, fragility is not just a personal condition which one can overcome through exercise and ascetism, as the Guevarist ideology of the 1960s and 1970s had it. It is something inter-subjective that connects us to others and inspires a form of mutual solidarity.

The key scenes regarding the body are shot in San Pablo, the leper community. The transformative dimension of this visit is announced by Dr. Pesce – not coincidentally portrayed as both an expert in bodies and Fuser’s true mentor in the film. The readings suggested by Pesce grant Ernesto’s souvenirs a new, social meaning, and the black-and-white images pop up while he is shown reading during a break in hospital, lying on a hospital bed, as though the diagnosis of social ills needed to be visually framed by the medical world, specialised in the diagnosis of physical illnesses. It is Pesce as well who suggests that the travel friends go to the colony of San Pablo, ‘to find answers’ – strangely, no explicit questions had been formulated by the travellers, which is why Dr. Pesce appears as a doctor not only of the body, but also of the soul, capturing the implicit questions that the journey has triggered in Fuser and his friend. The visit to the San Pablo community will indeed provide a form of revelation. In the travel diaries, the whole episode does not occupy much space – it simply appears as one temporary stop amidst others. In Salles’ film, however, it constitutes the climax of the film. Key in this regard is the way in which Guevara and Granado are shown to engage with the patients in the community, and the conversation Guevara has with a young girl who suffers from leprosy.

Before entering the leper community, the doctors and medical staff are supposed to put on gloves. It is explained to them, however, that the gloves are merely symbolical: in practice, the risk of contagion is non-existent once medical treatment has been started. Given this, Ernesto politely but categorically refuses to put on the gloves, shaking hands with them upon their arrival (see Figure 6.2). It will owe them the disapproval of Sor Alberta – the mother superior who represents the moral authority invested by the Church.

In defying this authority, Guevara shows his distancing from rules as they are formulated by others – a sign of his political awakening. This rebelliousness is expressed in a bodily manner (refusing the gloves, not going to mass) and is also consequently punished through the body: Fuser and Mial are denied food at dinner, and when they complain about this to Sor Alberta, she answers: ‘How can one expect to nourish the body if the mind is not nourished (by God’s words, it is implied)?’ The leper patients, however, save some of their leftovers to help them out, showing a sense of solidarity that passes directly through the body. The first person to tend them her plate is Silvia, a young leper patient who here plays a crucial role.



Figure 6.2 Fuser and Mial shaking hands with the leper patients

While Chichina had been the centre of his dreams in the first part of the film, until the emotional breakup, a young leper girl touches his heart in the second. Historically, the travellers did find a young leper girl in an adobe hut in another leper colony and were deeply moved by her despair at finding herself in the midst of such primitive conditions. The fact that she was young and white made her situation even more distressing, according to the travel diaries.¹² In the film, she is not racially marked, and it is only her youth which makes her situation look especially dramatic: ‘Ay, es joven-cita’. In a private conversation with her, Ernesto tells her that he too is a patient and agrees with her that life is ‘un calvario’ [an ordeal] that obliges one (and himself, as asthma patient, in particular) to fight for every breath of air. And yet, he tells her, it is important to tell death to go to hell (‘mandar la muerte al carajo’). By foregrounding his own vulnerability, Guevara succeeds in convincing the young woman to accept the operation, holding her hand during the surgical intervention, as though transfusing his calmness and optimism to her body, and talking to her during her recovery in hospital.

As a doctor, he goes beyond showing the usual care, thus creating a form of intimacy within which she feels safe. Her mutilated body (she loses the use of one arm) is a far cry from the erotic versions of Chichina and the Chilean woman, but still, it is dignified, and Ernesto’s mentioning of his little sister, ‘whom he misses the most’, creates a bond between two people being far from home, based on their youth and vulnerability. The buddies’ respectful engagement with the leper patients, expressed in their willingness to touch them without disgust (the refusal of gloves, the holding hands during the operation, but also the direct investigation of wounds), contrasts with some

passages in the books, in which the leper patients are presented as figurants in some horror movie. What's more, Fuser and Alberto's contacts with the patients in Salles' film transcend the medical dimension: music (a drum concert), sports (a football match) and practical activities (building houses and sharing meals) allow them to participate in a shared sense of community that passes through the body but relativises the medical divide between sick and healthy. The subversion of the normal hierarchy established between sick and healthy is subtly illustrated by the leper team marking the goal at the football match. The respectful engagement with the leper patients is also the result of Salles' delicate camera work, which refrains from bringing into focus the physical deformities that mark out these patients' bodies. This partial wiping out of their 'peculiarities' in bodily terms also prepares for the ethical message of the film, which passes through the physical identification of Fuser's body with the ones of the leper patients. Indeed, as we shall see, the 'swimming scene' ends by him being dragged out of the water onto the shore, their bodies visually fusing into one.

Night Swimming

Together with the birthday speech, the swimming scene provides the climactic moment of the film, both in dramatic and ideological terms. Logically, it has appeared in this book on several occasions already. Here, I provide further comment as swimming is a profoundly bodily activity that, in combination with the birthday speech, receives a thoroughly moral dimension as well. That the swim and the speech form a pair in the film is the result of a deliberate rearrangement of episodes from the travel diaries by the script writer. In reality, the swimming preceded the birthday party and speech by some days, and took place in full daylight. As a matter of fact, Ernesto testified to his lifelong fear of swimming at night in his letters.¹³ As explained before, the Amazon swim was a planned exploit by Ernesto and part of his adventure tourism; it simply looked like a physical challenge in an exotic setting that could mark him out as a first rate explorer for those at home, as indeed historically it did.¹⁴ In general, both Fuser and Alberto enjoyed swimming as a leisure activity during their trip.¹⁵

According to the travel diaries, the swim across the Amazon took two hours. Guevara hardly comments on it in his diary:

We went to fish in the afternoon in a nearby lagoon, and caught nothing, of course; but on the way back I determined to swim across the Amazon. It took me nearly two hours to the great despair of Dr. Montoya [whom they had visited to see the results of an operation on one of his patients], who had no desire to wait so long'. (Guevara 2004a: 150)

Compared to this laconic description, Granado's version is more extensive and underscores the courage of Guevara. Still, he does not grant it any ideological dimension either and remains particularly calm himself during the exploit:

Yesterday, Tuesday the 17th, Pelao [= another nickname for Ernesto] fulfilled another of his dreams: to swim across the Amazon. Despite many warnings about the danger – alligators and piranhas, which as we now know are quick to appear on the scene at the slightest trace of blood – he was insistent. I, of course, wasted no time in trying to dissuade him. I merely made him promise that if he was gashed by one of the hundreds of branches or logs dragged along by the current, he would immediately climb back on board the boat. (Granado 2003: 157)

As an exploit of a sportive kind, the swimming was not accompanied by an anxious crowd of onlookers. Instead of nearly drowning halfway, as Salles' film suggests, Ernesto simply enjoyed the water for a couple of minutes, floating on his back. This simply was part of his personal checklist of exciting things to do during the trip.

We set out at about two in the afternoon. The river at that point is almost a mile wide, but Ernesto swam with the current and then, about midway, he turned on his back and drifted for ten minutes. He kept swimming and came out on the other side about three miles downstream from the colony. Panting but happy, he climbed into the boat. We returned with quite a crowd – one of the doctors, Roger, the director's brother-in-law and some other young people who were accompanying me in the boat and couldn't hide their admiration of Fuser's courage. That night we celebrated his feat. (Granado 2003: 157)

In *The Motorcycle Diaries*, the swimming takes place on an impulse immediately after Guevara has pronounced his birthday speech. This suggests an intimate relationship between the two activities. While it is correct that Guevara replied to a toast on his birthday, this speech was presented by himself as unimportant and even ironic, celebrating some conventional rhetorical topic with the desired result: an applause from the bystanders. Again, Salles' script departs from the travel diaries by depriving the speech from its irony, underscoring the impact of Guevara's message on his listeners by zooming in on Alberto's face, whose serious and visibly moved expression suggests he realises the importance of this moment. The basic message of the speech resides in the vindication of a Latin American family, beyond

national frontiers, and is literally quoted from Guevara's travel diary (which – one should recall – constitutes a revision of travel notes):

Although our insignificance means we can't be spokespeople for such a noble cause, we 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. (Guevara 2004a: 148–9)¹⁶

In Granado's – much shorter – account, the question of a Latin American identity does not even appear in the speech:

He praised the investigative spirit and work of this hospital enclave here in the heart of the jungle, the hospitality and affection given to two outsiders they'd known nothing about and to whom they'd nonetheless opened their doors and their hearts. He was much applauded. (Granado 2003: 152)

The toast to a 'united Latin America', in combination with the reference to a 'mestizo race',¹⁷ is used here as a vindication of Latin Americanist thinking. This thinking includes, as one of its most important reference points in Latin American culture, the essay *Ariel* by José Enrique Rodó. As explained in Chapter 2, Rodó's essay celebrated youth and granted it the fundamental mission to help Latin America carve out an identity of its own and as distinct from the United States. The reference to the Mambo-Tango raft – a birthday gift from the community – humorously refers to Ernesto's mixing up the two dance styles. This gift corresponds to a historic fact, but in Salles' film it is used symbolically to suggest the unity of the continent, rooted in a cultural (and racial) hybridity.¹⁸

While the historic Guevara claims to have given his birthday speech under the influence of the typically Peruvian alcoholic drink pisco,¹⁹ the fictionalised version of him seems fully aware of what he has been saying. The ideologically charged concept of a Latin American unity, evoked in words, is presented as the direct, bodily equivalent of the birthday party – a family ritual transposed onto a new context of friends and colleagues in Peru. It is remarkable that, while the dancing scenes in Argentina and Chile subtly hinted at social tensions (Alberto bumping against an aristocratic snob 'by accident', Chilean men warning the mechanic the Argentine is running off with his wife), the party in San Pablo is the first in which no such tensions

are evoked. This absence symbolises the existence of a real ‘community’. The historic confusion between the mambo and the tango – an anecdote of the travel diary – is seized upon to increase this idea of a cross-national unity, celebrated through a happy gathering of bodies.

Ignited by the fervour of his own speech on Latin America’s unity, Fuser suddenly leaves the dancers behind and walks onto the river which here appears as the dividing line between the healthy persons and the leper patients. When introducing them to the leper community, their local host, Dr Bresciani, had explained to Fuser and Mial that the medical staff and religious persons lived on the northern side of the river, while the leper patients were lodged, at a safe distance, on the southern part of it. The swimming thus takes place in a symbolically charged river, directing the body from one side to the other in an attempt to symbolically bridge the gap between the sick and the healthy, the excluded and the included. Refusing to accept this division, Fuser doubles his rhetorical appeal to think beyond national frontiers, in his birthday speech, with one that rejects other kinds of borders between people as well. Or rather, he deliberately places himself on the side of the excluded.

In doing so, Ernesto’s body becomes a ‘carrier of consciousness’ (Manzano 2014: 219), the expression of a moral choice regarding where to position oneself in society.²⁰ The body is not swimming back and forth; it is deliberately directed towards the other shore, where Ernesto is welcomed as ‘one of them’, his body being dragged out of the cold water and carried along, in a Christ-like imagery that visually blends his body with the one of the leper patients (see Figure 6.3).²¹ It is here that his youthful body is absorbed by the collective body of ‘the people’ – a concept also present in the final series of black and white images depicting the ‘ordinary’, common people met along the road. From a historical point of view, the visual evocation of ‘the people’ in *The Motorcycle Diaries* connects the film to the politicised Latin American cinema from the 1960s and 1970s, which had put this notion centre stage, before it would disappear from screen in the ensuing decades (Aguilar 2015).

The visual fusion with the people turns Fuser into a new man, being reborn from the water as from an immense baptism (see also Chapter 2). Having this ‘rebirth’ take place on the day of his birthday underscores the symbolic side of the swim. Putting his own life at risk, being willing to face death – as the scene suggests – Fuser also shows that moral choices rely on an intimate connection between life and death that passes through the body. However, ‘poner cuerpo’ here lacks the connotation of violence which it had in the theory of armed struggle carried with it. The idea of the self-sacrificing body remains, but it is now transposed onto a context in which not death and violence, but life and community are celebrated.



Figure 6.3 Fuser's body blends with the bodies of the leper patients

Given the importance of borders in this scene, it is no coincidence that Jorge Drexler's programmatic song 'At the Other Side of the River' emerges at the borders of the film only. It is heard during the end credits and constitutes a musical bridge between the fictional universe and the world outside (both historical and contemporary). Interestingly, it was originally composed for Mercedes Sosa (1935–2009), an Argentine singer who became world-famous as representative of Latin America's politicised folk music in the 1960s and 1970s, also known as *Nueva Canción* [New Song]. Ultimately, however, it was Drexler's more intimist performance which Salles preferred, unburdening the film from its potentially too ideologically charged performance by legendary Mercedes Sosa.²² The title of the song not only relates to the swimming but also to Fuser and Mial's subsequent departure from San Pablo on their raft: 'Rema, rema...' [Row, row, keep on rowing...]. The river here appears as a universal symbol of life, infusing into the moral choice made in the preceding scene, a message of hope: 'Yo veo una luz al otro lado del río' [I see a light at the other shore]. The song won an Oscar for Best Original Song in 2005, but the glamorous performance by a Zorro-like Antonio Banderas during the ceremony constituted a sharp contrast with the intimist performance Salles had chosen for the film. More basically, the song illustrates Salles' endeavour to recover the political importance of a historic Guevara while moving away from the explicitly ideological discourse on politics from Latin America's 1960s and 1970s.

Conclusion

Salles' film does not end on a message, but on something to ponder: '¡Cuánta injusticia, no! [So much injustice, don't you think?]' This is not a political stance, but it does open up the film to future, more concrete engagements, as illustrated by Che's short life summary in the end. *The Motorcycle Diaries* has been presented as an apolitical, or – at best – pre-political film (Prestholdt 2019: 202). In terms of explicit ideas, of concrete political denunciations, the film's protagonist is, indeed, a rather mitigated version of the revolutionary Che Guevara we know from history, one more transferrable onto other contexts, more digestible for those who take issue with his ideas. But art does not engage with politics in the same way as pamphlets and newspapers do. It works on the symbols related to historic instances of political struggle. In this chapter, I have shown that the body occupies centre stage in *The Motorcycle Diaries* not only for historic reasons (Che as an asthma patient and a doctor), but also for political reasons.

The historic appeal to engage oneself through the body, summarised in the invocation to 'poner cuerpo', implies that bodies in Salles' film are sites of convergence or divergence with deeper meanings as related to Guevara's legacy. While Fuser's inner change is an effect of the entire journey, the specific moment of his political awakening is expressed in bodily terms in the swimming scene. Here, central connotations of Guevara's legacy – self-sacrifice, bodily engagement – are conjured up as well as neutralised. The body remains endowed with a sense of agency, enabling Fuser to make fundamental choices, but the idea of 'armed struggle' is evacuated from his persona. Or rather, the idea of the 'struggle' transforms into the one of 'the struggle with the self': the moment in which Guevara nearly drowns in the midst of the river is the moment in which he defies death, not because of an enemy, but because of his own impulse.

Moreover, community is built with bodies, independently from ideas (there is no Marxism nor communism involved), and based upon a shared awareness of vulnerability, encouraging mutual solidarity and respect. Reclaiming the right to be vulnerable for the historic hero does not deprive him of his autonomy, nor of his potential to appear 'heroic'. It simply grounds his future heroic deeds in a bodily reaction to injustice, consisting of feelings of indignation and empathy, of being moved and becoming affected. Basically, the film shows what Michael Hardt asserts regarding the political dimension of affects: 'our ability to become affected is on a par with our ability to act' (2007: 11). While ideas and ideologies change or die down, feelings of indignation at the sight of injustice remain. Inscribing these onto the body is a way of preserving the political

potential of a hero whose heroism has become contested and rejuvenating him beyond his time.

General Note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Portuguese and Spanish language source are the author's.

Notes

- 1 The following relies on Manzano (2014), especially chapter VII, entitled '*Poner el cuerpo. The Youth Body between Eroticism and Revolutionary Politics*' (193-220). The author presents Ernesto Guevara as 'the main example' of this view on the body (209). The belief that only a few men could stir a revolution was generally referred to as 'foquismo' – a word derived from 'foco', for ignition point. Régis Debray provided the theoretical underpinnings for this current in *Revolution in the Revolution?* (1967) (see also Chapter 3).
- 2 See Chapter 2 for the explanation of this nickname.
- 3 The travel diaries bear witness to the popularity of motorcycling in those days. Passing the Seven Lakes road to Bariloche, they are given shelter by an Austrian man, who sympathises with the young travellers as a former biker: 'An Austrian caretaker who had raced motorbikes as a young man gave us a place to stay, in an empty shed, caught between his desire to help fellow bikers in need and fear of his boss' (Guevara 2004a: 52). See also the anecdotes regarding Guevara's first motorcycle lesson, given by his pa, who was an enthusiastic motor driver as well (Guevara Lynch 2008: 124).
- 4 'In a widely publicised opportunity, boys and girls were encouraged to practice motorcycling, and Perón himself used to offer them practical lessons when riding his own motor scooter [1954]' (Manzano 2014: 25).
- 5 Or, as Manzano puts it: 'That [the revolutionary body] was not a given body but one that had to be carved out, which entailed regulating corporeal practices' (2014: 218).
- 6 Though composed in 1927 already, the tango 'Mala junta' is included here in the period pieces as both Guevara and Granado refer in their diaries to the popularity of the tango across 1950s Latin America.
- 7 In *And your mother too*, the character interpreted by García Bernal is lured into a one night stand with his best buddy Tenoch by their female travel companion. In *Bad education*, García Bernal portrays the role of a transgender. For a detailed analysis of sexuality in Cuarón's film, see Baugh (2019).
- 8 Guevara (2004a: 142); Granado (2003: 136).
- 9 For a critical introduction to this concept, see Brown (2021). Important references in this debate are Tronto (1993) and Pelluchon (2011) and (2020). The concept has also been popularised by Brown (2010).
- 10 E.g., 'Ernesto's fierce determination to overcome his physical shortcomings was thus a major factor in the development of his personality from early years' (Castañeda 1998: 10).
- 11 'His doctor had told me that Ernesto should not be playing rugby as it was seriously detrimental to his health. The doctor said that his heart would not be able to endure it. When I said this to Ernesto, he replied, "I like playing rugby and I will continue to do so even if it kills me"' (Guevara Lynch 2008: 142).
- 12 See Guevara (2004a: 121-2) and Granado (2003: 106).

- 13 '[...] one of the hens we were taking [on the raft] to eat fell into the river and the current swept it away. The man who had swum the full width of the river in San Pablo didn't have the courage to dive in after it, partly because we'd seen alligators surfacing every now and then, and partly because *I've never really overcome my fear of water at night*' (Guevara 2004a: 155; emphasis added).
- 14 E.g., this testimony from a new acquaintance of Ernesto's during their second trip: 'Guevara, the doctor, is a very interesting guy. Last year he sailed down the Amazon on a raft' (Herrer, quoted in Ferrer 2006: 179).
- 15 See, for instance, their passing through the Peruvian village Oxapampa: 'We had what for us was a wonderful day; swimming in the river, letting all of our worries disappear, eating a lot of good food and drinking exquisite coffee' (Guevara 2004a: 130). 'We went for a swim that afternoon in the Río Ucayali which looks a lot like the Upper Paraná' (Guevara 2004a: 139).
- 16 In the original Spanish version, Guevara refers to a United America ('América Unida', Guevara 2004b: 136), but the indication that it stretches from Mexico to the Strait of Magellan proves that it is Latin America which is referred to.
- 17 'We constitute one single mestizo race from Mexico to the strait of Magellan' (quoted from the film). 'We constitute a single mestizo race, which from Mexico to the Magellan Straits bears notable ethnographical similarities' (Guevara 2004a: 149). In the film, Fuser refers to 'América Unida'; in the book, the speech refers to a 'United Latin America' (Guevara 2004a: 149).
- 18 In the historic documents, the reference to a truly Latin American identity, as distinct from a North American one, is less obvious. In a letter to his mother, Guevara uses the term 'Pan-American speech' to summarise his birthday speech: 'On the 14th, they gave me a party with lots of *pisco*, a kind of gin which makes you wonderfully drunk. The director of the colony toasted us and, inspired by the booze, I replied with a quintessentially Pan-American speech [sic], winning great applause from the notable, and notably drunk, audience' (Guevara 2004a: 154).
- 19 'With everyone slightly drunk and in high spirits, the colony's director toasted us warmly, and I, 'piscoed', replied with something elaborate, like the following. [...] My oratory offering was received with great applause. The party, consisting in these parts of drinking as much alcohol as possible, continued until three in the morning, when we finally called it a day' (Guevara 2004a: 148-9).
- 20 This aligns with the representation of the body as 'the carrier of consciousness' in Latin America's revolutionary 1960s (Manzano 2014: 219).
- 21 On the tension between a generational identity, as youth, and a political identity referring to 'the people', see Manzano (2014: 253).
- 22 For a film so heavily drawing on Gustavo Santaolalla's musical work, it is interesting to point out that Mercedes Sosa's politicised folk music represented the very opposite of Santaolalla's musical style in the 1960s. See Karush (2016: 179).

Epilogue

To discover who you really are, you need to get out of your comfort zone, seek challenges, test yourself, explore new things. And this self-discovery can turn you into a meaningful person for others. Salles' film taps into deep desires of young people: to know what their role in society might be beyond the obvious career choices that others present to them. To ponder the balance between fear and courage in their personality and stretch the limits of what they thought they could do. To become affected by new things and encounters and change the life path parents designed for them. In this film, beyond any political model, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara is a young person in search of his identity, and the message is positive: as long as you dare look life into the eyes, you will find it, and great things can happen.

This is the Guevara which Salles' film moulds by returning to his first important journey across the Americas. In doing so, Salles injects elements of Guevara's later life into this formative period. For it appears that 'the real' Che wanted to go on travelling, not fight. He wanted to be free, not bounded. Along the way, he became a bohemian with a wife and a child, none of which was any real obstacle for him to go on looking for what he really wanted. The life-changing encounter? It took place four years after the time frame in which Salles' film is set and concerned someone not portrayed in the film: Fidel Castro. Yet, this film evokes an evolution in young Guevara that makes, what comes after, understandable. It does so by changing Che's image and erasing aspects that had determined his meaning for long: his association with violence, his rejection of democracy in favour of an – in practice – authoritarian system, his machismo and cult of action. The analysis over the previous chapters has shown how these elements are channelled towards less polemical domains, and how the image of the medical student allows for a portrayal of bodies that shows political commitment to respond to an impulse first: to help others for whom one cares.

Centring on emerging adulthood as the youthful formative period in life, *The Motorcycle Diaries* encourages its young viewers to embrace life and

opt for adventure instead of the foreseeable. It does so by drawing on the road movie as a genre strongly marked by the values of the unpredictable and the unplanned. At the same time, Salles establishes a dialogue with a tradition of political cinema from Latin America in which the attractive side of these values is infused with a social dimension. The unexpected encounter, typical for the genre, here concerns those who belong to other groups in society, to other races and classes and thus, rather than political tourism, we find a form of social tourism in this film, combined with an interest in indigenous cultures (cultural tourism) and a willingness to help out during holidays (voluntourism). In this way, the film sheds a positive view on tourists travelling off the beaten path – a category of backpackers that, up to a certain point, is pioneered by the historic Che Guevara himself.

In addition to tapping into existing traditions, Salles also needed to update these. The figure of Guevara sits at the crossroads of two periods in Latin American history: one in which everything seemed possible and young people appeared as the primary agents of change. The other marked by an awareness that such times had passed, that a revolution had not happened but failed, taking many lives for many reasons, but basically because revolution was in the air and some people wanted to stop it. If the name Guevara still inspires nostalgia today, it can only do so by transcending the concrete results of revolutionary activism and return to the period prior to its outcome. This is an affective return, to the feelings that preceded and inspired it.

Such feelings are still present in today's societies. After the 1980s and 1990s fostered the punk culture and no future movement, young people have again taken to the streets, in Latin America and elsewhere, mobilising for new options for the future. What keeps Guevara young to the present generation is his idealism, his willingness to pass to action – not violent action anymore, but political action in democratic systems. His ideological image is replaced by a new one, in which he exudes honesty, authenticity and perseverance: virtues that speak to any generation.

Guevara has thus become, thanks to Salles' film, a transgenerational icon. Like any travelling sign, he has exchanged some of its old meanings for new ones in order to preserve what still appears as its core: idealism and a willingness to make it happen. Such values recall the imaginary which José Enrique Rodó fostered at the beginning of the 20th century in his essay *Ariel* – a text that needs to be taken into account when discussing youth in Latin America. For in the southern part of the Americas, youth is not only the new audience of consumers which post-war capitalism started to target (through film, music and fashion). It is also, and not in the least, the more basic source from which renewal can come.

What Salles' film aims to do is to tap into this reservoir of energy and direct it towards a social project for a united Latin America. In this way, he

provides a very positive image of an active Latin American youth, and perhaps of youth in general. 'Youth', to the humanist director, is first and foremost dreaming of a better future, and wanting to do something for that goal. It is about 'poner cuerpo', not with arms but with actions. While revolution has become an outdated concept, activism ranks high on youth's agenda nowadays. The new Guevara-inspired action is not systemic anymore, but issue-oriented, as one notices in the scenes filmed in San Pablo. This is an important twist, but one that takes into account the change of times and approaches the idealism of the 1960s in a more pragmatic way. Activism as the new utopianism and young people as its carriers.

Those of us who are less free or adventurous can relive the journey at home, watching it on DVD or engaging in musical tourism through Spotify. If the film speaks to the hearts of so many, it is because its journey is so much more than a historic journey. This is a journey which shows the possibilities that are hidden in each moment of life. It tells you, as Alberto tells his friend in the beginning, that life is given but that one chooses the way one wants to live it. And that in this choice resides our freedom and perhaps something more: our moral responsibility.

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