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The Motorcycle Diaries (Diarios de Motocicleta)

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Abstract
This is a review of *The Motorcycle Diaries (Diarios de Motocicleta)* (2005).

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Religion, like travel, involves becoming either lost or found, and it may be for that reason that films about travel (like books about travel) are so religiously appealing. After all, the notion that life is a journey is a lasting and dear cliché. In some periods, the clear religious preference is for becoming found. Today we seem to prefer getting lost both in travel and religious theory and many of our most important cultural products explore the fascinating topography of being in that peculiar and ambiguous state. If we add the fact that stories are told about so many religious figures who took journeys — Muhammad's hegira; Moses leading his people out of Egypt; Jesus' forty days in the desert; the Buddha's itinerant teaching—then it might not be much of a stretch to make a film of another larger-than-life figure, Che Guevara and his 5000 mile journey through South America prior to his apotheosis. Brazilian director Walter Salles does just that in The Motorcycle Diaries. Guevara's 1952 travels from Buenos Aires toward an ever-greater concern for the suffering and dispossessed was also a movement toward a future that is still so contentious that every journalist's review of the film mentions controversy. A man who is loved and reviled, a man around whom myths proliferate, a man who in some ways moves masses of people around issues of hope, despair, and the possible betrayal of ideals: we are fortunate to have a superb film to watch such a figure as he is both lost and found on the road.
The Motorcycle Diaries has the pattern of most travel accounts, all of them aspects that underscore its religious value: departure, companionship, misadventure, significant encounters with places and people, and personal transformation, though this film significantly omits the last expected element, return. When Guevara departs on his journey, he is known as Ernesto, and he is accompanied by his friend, Alberto Grenado. There is an extended and emotional scene of leave-taking, a separation from his entire family and privileged past. He will no longer be a boy, yet what carries him away from home is the feeble and unreliable "Mighty One," the motorcycle of the title, which immediately nearly collides with traffic, the first of many crashes, break-downs, and failings. T.S. Eliot urged "fare forward voyagers," but it is remarkable (and notable) how poorly these two travelers fare and how seldom it is forward. They steer the motorcycle badly, they lose their tent to a wind, they antagonize a mechanic who offers to repair the motorcycle, and they nearly starve. Ernesto struggles with asthma and seems close to death. They fare no better than "The Mighty One," and when it is carted off, finished, it might almost have been them.

Yet the film to its credit does not depict Ernesto and Alberto as triumphant over adversity, that debilitating cliché. Instead their struggles and failings enable closer contact with the most formidable and engrossing characters in the film: highly particular landscapes and highly individualized persons. The impact of both
is more visual than verbal, reminding me of Alphonso Lingis's advice that it is in touching other bodies that "there is a lesion in the tissue of words and discourses and the networks of powers." The sight of the deserts, mountains, cities, villages, marketplaces, rivers, and roads, roads, roads, the sight of the two dozen faces (of vendors in the marketplace, lepers, miners, villagers, doctors) simply halts the viewer and prevents an easy progress, just as they do for the two travelers. It is in being halted and being affected that Ernesto comes to change in the film, again not heroically, as Hollywood might have done it, but in having his course diverted.

_The Motorcycle Diaries_ has as remarkable and yet quiet an ending as any recent film. Alberto has found his place in a hospital; he will stay there and work. Significantly, Ernesto does not stop, but departs in a plane. His is not a trip with an end. As the plane takes off we are given a review, in black and white, of many of the people of the film: real people, not actors, it seems, in real places, not sets. The film reminds us that it is not just made of art. Then we see a shot of the real Alberto Grenado who went to Cuba to rejoin Che after the Revolution, and it is that octogenarian who is watching Ernesto's plane take off. For a long time we see his face, an astonishing piece of topography, cragged, creased, with many growths and colors, its bilateral symmetry long gone. This face is South America. It is Alberto and Ernesto's journey. It is their history and the history of suffering and struggle, hope and despair, justice and injustice, eros and comedy. When asked to define
poetry, Coleridge replied that we must start (and end) by defining the poet. *The Motorcycle Diaries* defines the social, political, economic, and, yes, religious history of a significant era in terms of a young man, a 5000 miles journey, and, finally, a face.