



ADVOCATE *insider*

May 21, 2008

Cannes Day Eight: Day Of Che

It was all Che, all day today. No early morning screening so everyone slept in for once. And with "Che" apparently the last great hope of the festival for a masterpiece, anticipation was running high. Or so I thought. Actually, a number of people just couldn't be bothered to deal with a four and a half hour movie (how sad is that, when you're at Cannes?) and I heard numerous stories of people saying, "Naw, I'll see it when it comes out in the US" or "I just gave away my tickets." Nonetheless, because the press is only getting to see it in smaller venues, it'll still be a hard one to get access for. I line up two hours in advance and a friend with a weaker badge lines up four hours in advance because we cannot miss the film for our outlets. They've announced we shouldn't think of the movie as two separate films but as one long film with an intermission. In a first, they even provide sandwiches, Kit Kat bars and water during the 15 minute break. The first half shows Che helping Fidel Castro come to power in Cuba. The second half shows Che recklessly, almost foolishly, trying to duplicate that success in Bolivia with tragic results.

I'm completely ready for this film: I've read Jon Lee Anderson's excellent biography, Che's diary of his Cuban adventures and I'm halfway through his Bolivian diary. And thank goodness. The first film cuts back and forth between the guerrilla warfare in Cuba, Che meeting Fidel for the first time in Mexico City and Che's memorable speech at the United Nations. The second film plunges murkily into the struggles in Bolivia. Everything in the film is presented with care and thought. The first half is shot in CinemaScope it seems (rather a bourgeois aspect ratio for a film about a revolutionary, don't you think?) and the second is boxier. Both were shot on a brand new digital camera that's incredibly light and captures a terrific image. Director Steven Soderbergh used mostly natural light and the result is a documentary film's sense of you-are-there-ness without the

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grainy drawback of most digital cameras. Really striking.

But frankly, if I hadn't been so prepared via the book, I would have been quite at sea at times, especially the Bolivia half where so many of the fighters could blend together. One small point: Che is shown in disguise, meeting his own children in Cuba before taking off for Bolivia (he'll never see them again and during this visit, he daren't risk saying he's their dad). I found the scene emotionally intriguing in the book. On film it barely registers and I'm certain 99% of the people who watch it will be wondering what's going on and why Che felt the need to be in disguise in Cuba, of all places. (The fact is that Che didn't want anyone to know where he was and also wanted to give Castro deniability when it came to fomenting revolution in Latin America. He also was embarrassed about the fiasco of the Congo -- for all those reasons and more, he kept his brief return to Cuba secret and didn't want to risk his little kids mentioning to friends that their dad had been home and thus blowing his cover. Virtually none of this is transmitted in the movie, so at best viewers might just think Che was testing out his disguise, which is true to a degree but misses the complexity of the situation.)

Every potential negative side of Che is ignored, even during these two periods when the negatives were so few and far between. His romance with a fellow fighter (Catalina Sandina Moreno) occurs off camera between the two films. His most famous famous bit of writing is the story during the Cuban revolution when Che ordered a fighter to kill a small dog they cared for that had followed their movements and might have betrayed them to nearby Batista troops. It's a wrenching little story and I was certain it would be in the film. Nope. We see a "trial" in the field of a guerilla who killed another revolutionary. Che and Fidel wanted the guerilla spared though many called for his execution and it was put to a vote. (Che's desire for leniency was notable since he was particularly ruthless about those he felt should be punished.) Oddly, the crime the guy is charged with is changed. In the book, he tells a recalcitrant soldier to do something and when the guy ignores him he pulls out a gun and puts it to the guy's head when it accidentally goes off. In the movie, the guy describes the other man coming at him and fearing for his own life -- more a case of self-defense than stupidity. Why change even that?

At many, many other points, brief scenes and throw-away lines had great significance to me because I knew the background but I was certain they wouldn't, indeed couldn't register with viewers who weren't immersed in Che's story. The filmmakers had so much knowledge at their fingertips, I think they forgot

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how little most people would know. It's well shot, intelligent and Benicio Del Toro is very good as Che, adding flashes of humanity and fear and care and humor whenever possible to the matter of fact action.

Two standout moments: his final death scene (shot at times POV) and a great moment when the guerillas realize the federal troops are closing in (it's a classic shot of two fighters peering up at a ridge and seeing one person appear, and then another (this one with a rifle slung over their shoulder) and then another and another...and then a whole MESS of soldiers that makes you think, 'Uh-oh'). I can't praise it the way I would like but I certainly can't disparage it. Certainly this is no warts and all portrait, though Soderbergh will argue that's just a result of the two areas he focused on. Technically fascinating and thoughtful if unemotional and remote. Just like Che, later in life.

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