

## **The Motorcycle Diaries dir. Walter Salles** **- Film Study – (ANSWERS)**

(based on notes from: <www.filmeducation.org>)

### **INTRODUCTION**

**1. The distances travelled by the two were vast, especially considering much of this was on foot. How does the filmmaker convey this sense of distance to the audience?**

- Use of on-screen text with miles and date to show the viewer how far the pair have travelled.
- Bird's eye camera shots from a high angle that pan across a long shot of the changing landscape.
- Often these shots track Ernesto and Alberto on the motorbike, who seem small and inconsequential compared to the terrain.

**2. Why do you think the filmmaker chose to include shots of the pair in many different weather conditions? (There may be more than one reason for this.)**

- Changing seasons also indicate the huge distance travelled as they highlight how much time has passed.
- The different weather conditions – snow, high wind, rain, and desert drought - draw attention to the sheer difficulty of their journey.

### **THE EARLY STAGES:**

**3. What is the relationship between Ernesto and his mother like? What does this say about his character at this point in the story?**

- In the early scene at the family table, the director highlights a close relationship between Ernesto and his mother through the use similar height mid/close-ups that highlight the warmth and care they feel towards each other through facial expressions.
- When Ernesto is about to depart with Alberto, his mother reminds him to wear his scarf. This is meant to indicate to the viewer that she thinks of Ernesto as a child still.

**4. The first stop along the journey is at the home of Chinchina, Ernesto's girlfriend. How are her family portrayed and why do you think this stay is presented in some detail in the film?**

- When Ernesto and Alberto ride up to Chinchina's house, Salles employs a high angle bird's eye shot to show the house. It is European in style and sits in the middle of a well-manicured lawn. Alberto comments, "Where the f- are we? Switzerland?". The house is indicative of the wealth and social status of Chinchina's family.
- At the dinner party, Chinchina's father and other guests emphasize wealth, privilege and academic achievement such as PhD from Oxford. The men are costumed in suits and the women in formal wear, except for Ernesto and Alberto, who are still in their travelling clothes. They are looked after by servants.
- Salles presents Ernesto and Alberto's stay at Chinchina's in detail so that the audience can see the life of privilege and wealth that Ernesto 'Che' Guevara might of have had, if the events which occur later in the film had not changed the central protagonist so much.

**5. What is the mood in the early stages of the film? Consider: What do we see the characters doing and saying? What locations do we see? What effect do the lighting and sound have?**

- The mood early on in the film is light-hearted and comic. The near-miss with the bus as Ernesto and Alberto depart Buenos Aires help create a comic tone through the use of slapstick. They also attempt to race some horse riders on their motorcycle. During their stay at Chinchina's, Ernesto tries to seduce his girlfriend while Alberto has success with the family maid.
- Locations: wealthy suburbs of Buenos Aires; green, fertile countryside; extraordinary wealth and status of Chinchina's family as represented by their house.
- The lighting is generally sunny, bright when outside emphasizing good weather. During the evening inside Chinchina's house, it is golden creating a warm, positive tone.
- The music is also positive with a light flamenco guitar sound that accompanies the riders of "The Mighty One". The music at Chinchina's is a popular song which is designed to dance to.

**6. How is the difference in character between Ernesto and Alberto conveyed even in these early stages?**

- Ernesto is less confident than Alberto who is always joking and talking. He tends to stand to the periphery of scenes as illustrated during the dance at Chinchina's house. Alberto is a confident dancer, happily dancing with a number of different

partners, while Ernesto who lacks confidence stands to the side. Later on, Ernesto sleeps alone in his tent while Alberto seduces the maid.

### **SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS:**

**7. Many biographies of Ernesto's life state that his experience of the mine at Chuquicamata was extremely influential upon his political thinking, yet we do not see the treatment of the workers portrayed in any great detail in the film. Why do you think this is?**

- Salles chooses not to emphasize the suffering of the miners at Chuquicamata through direct visual representation. Rather the director employs a more subtle approach, using the dry, inhospitable desert terrain that Ernesto and Alberto walk through to get to the mine to highlight the difficult work conditions. Salles also uses the interactions between Ernesto, Alberto and the communist couple to highlight the awful conditions at the mine, because the work is so dangerous they even employ communists. Finally, the brutish treatment of the workers by the mine overseer during the selection process also draws attention to the awful working conditions, as he refuses to give the mine workers some water, despite their obvious thirst and Ernesto's request.

**8. As Ernesto and Alberto talk to the man and his wife who are on their way to work in the mine, this simple conversation takes place:**

*Miner's wife: Are you two looking for work?*

*Ernesto: No, we aren't looking for work.*

*Miner's wife: Then why are you travelling?*

*Ernesto: We travel just to travel.*

*Miner's wife: Bless you... Blessed be your travels.*

**How does this make you feel about the characters involved? Does it help explain why the experience had such a profound effect on Ernesto?**

- This scene is employed by Salles to draw attention to the luxury involved in Ernesto and Alberto's journey around South America. They are able to travel as tourists unlike the communist couple who must go to the mine to find work. The experience has a profound effect on Ernesto who begins to realize how privileged his life has been, and how much suffering there is around him.

### **LATTER STAGES:**

**9. How are the psychological changes that the pair go through on the road reflected in their physical appearance in this stage of the film?**

- Towards the end of the film, the psychological changes that Alberto and Ernesto are experiencing are highlighted through their disheveled physical appearance. They are no longer the clean-cut young men from a privileged background in Buenos Aires. Now, their hair is uncut, faces unshaven and their clothes dirty and in need of repair. This makes them appear more like the poor, impoverished people that they are meeting than people like Chinchina and her family.

**10. The film takes on a much more symbolic tone during this stage; for example Ernesto talks about the river as more than just a physical division of the two parts of the colony. What other imagery or symbolism can you think of during their time at the colony?**

- Ernesto and Alberto defying the nuns and shaking the hands of the leprosy victims without wearing rubber gloves, as they realize it cannot be transferred through skin-to-skin contact.
- Ernesto and Alberto playing soccer with the leprosy patients.
- Ernesto and Alberto being given food by the leprosy patients as the nuns have refused them lunch as they did not attend Sunday mass.
- Ernesto making political a speech at his birthday party about all of South America being part of one race.
- Ernesto successfully swimming the Amazon River at night on his birthday party, as he feels that the patients are deliberately segregated from the healthy by being forced to live on the other side of the river. He also overcomes his asthma to do this.