



# CHE

Spring  
Season  
2009

## From a review by J Hoberman, Village Voice:

Why Che Guevara, and why now? Who in 2008 could possibly be interested in a four-hour movie on the minutiae of guerrilla warfare? Steven Soderbergh's *Che* is an unabashed historical epic opening as an unprecedented historic event—or at least an old-fashioned roadshow. The movie's two parts will show together for one week on the biggest of Manhattan's big screens, in advance of their individual releases early next year. You may wonder why, but then, ever since *Che* premiered in Cannes last May, Soderbergh's superlatively crafted, dramatically compelling, emotionally distant account of Guevara's participation in the Cuban Revolution of the 1950s and the disastrous Bolivian uprising a decade later has been baffling critics and audiences alike.

*The Motorcycle Diaries* and 20th Century Fox's long-ago debacle, *Che!*, were made to capitalize on the Guevara myth; each, in its way, served to infuriate either Che's enemies or his fans. By contrast, Soderbergh's epic is neither romantic nor even particularly partisan. While the real Che may be (or may once have been) cool, the filmmaker's attitude is way cooler. Whatever heat star and co-producer Benicio Del Toro brings to the title role, Soderbergh's project is to search for the technocrat, which is to say, himself, in the original revolutionary rock star.

Throughout *Che*, the emphasis is on process—indeed, Soderbergh acted as his own director of photography, under the name Peter Andrews. Moreover, the movie presents its subject almost entirely in the context of three events—the Cuban Revolution, the Bolivian debacle, and a 1964 trip to the United Nations. There were some at Cannes who accused Soderbergh and screenwriter Peter Buchman of evading the facts: Where was Che's bureaucratic bungling and his persecution of political enemies? What about his love affairs? His adventures in the Congo? Why, others wanted to know, did Soderbergh withhold the ecstatic entrance into Havana? Everything must be deduced from Che's behavior under actual or rhetorical fire—he is defined in terms of his desire and capacity to make history. Seeing *Che* at Cannes, I thought it perhaps a great movie and certainly an admirably uncommercial one, describing it in the *Voice* as "a skillfully didactic, nervily dialectical, feel-good, feel-bad combat film" that had "less in common with *The Motorcycle Diaries* than with Peter Watkins's *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* or even a structuralist extravaganza like Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale*." Upon a second viewing some months later, after Soderbergh normalized *Che* (mainly by tweaking the first half to soften its strangeness), his movie seemed disappointingly less formally rigorous—but even more scrupulous in its pursuit of an objective narrative. The filmmaker wanted to make history as well.

The man who put U.S. indies (and the old Miramax) on the map when his first film, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, took the Audience Award at the 1989 Sundance Film Festival and the Palme d'Or at Cannes, Soderbergh has enjoyed the indie-ist career of any contemporary American filmmaker—whimsically alternating between big-budget crowd-pleasers and pretentious, scruffy experiments. *Traffic* came closest to reconciling these modes, but *Che* does as well. The movie's first part has a classic Hollywood look, while the second is more rough-and-ready cinema vérité. In his interviews, Soderbergh has emphasized his use of a new lightweight high-performance digital cine-camera to shoot *Che*, setting up, as Amy Taubin noted in *Film Comment*, an underlying equation between guerrilla warfare and guerrilla filmmaking.

Does this trivialize the movie's subject? Only to the degree that making art is making a lesser form of history. *Che* gives full reign to a quixotic strain of Soderbergh's work—the desire to use Franz Kafka as a fictional character, remake Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, or, as in *The Good German*, create a '40s movie in the 21st century. *Ocean's 11* is both a caper movie and a successfully pulled caper; *Solaris* is a movie about the imperfection of simulated memory that is also such a memory.

If *Che* seems self-reflexive, it's because Soderbergh is less the driven auteur than a highly intelligent artisan who sets himself a problem and goes about solving it. Assuming responsibility for this ambitious, risk-taking, possibly pointless project enabled him a means to identify with his impossibly legendary subject.

A month away from its 50th anniversary, the Cuban Revolution has not yet disappeared as a political issue and, in some respects, remains more contemporary than the Third World guerrilla struggles it inspired. Still, Soderbergh's strategy demands that the viewer project a measure of pathos into *Che*—or at least an appreciation for the painful failure dramatized on screen.

When *Che* was shown at the last New York Film Festival, self-described über-blogger Karina Longworth observed that where the movie's champions were typically veteran critics (like *moi*), a number of younger

online writers such as herself found the movie wearisome and off-putting in its detachment. Diffident or objective—which characterizes Soderbergh's attitude, and what are his didactic ends? *Che* might be described as an anti-biopic that nevertheless seeks to humanize its subject (that is, the history that its subject made or failed to make) with a shocking absence of human interest.

This sets up an intriguing dialectic, but whatever Soderbergh's intentions, *Che* is most definitely not a movie in the hyper-dramatizing tradition of D.W. Griffith or Steven Spielberg (or, for that matter, *Milk*). History is not personalized. As a filmmaker, Soderbergh is closer to Otto Preminger in his observational use of the moving camera, or to Roberto Rossellini, whose serenely understated period documentaries—*Socrates* or *The Age of Medici*—presented historical facts as though they were commonplace.

At its best, *Che* is both action film and ongoing argument. Each new camera setup seeks to introduce a specific idea—about Che or his situation—and every choreographed battle sequence is a sort of algorithm where the camera attempts to inscribe the event that is being enacted. For *Che*'s first half, editing is crucial. Moving on two tracks back and forth in time, it demands an unusually active viewer. The second part, a grim tale straightforwardly told, only requires you keep *The Argentine* playing in your head. Still, every Bolivian sequence has its Cuban parallel, which is why *Che*'s two parts are best seen together. The second may be the more realized of the two—and could certainly stand on its own—but it is only comprehensible in the light of what has come before. Elevating Part Two to tragedy, Part One puts some hope in hopelessness—and even in history.