

## Inequity. A Trip through Latin America: *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004)

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### Summary

Two youths, Ernesto Guevara of 23 years, student advanced of medicine and Alberto Granado of 29 years, biochemical, begun a trip through Latin America through 5 countries. This trip through for more than 12.000 kilometers is initiated in Argentina in December of 1951 and finalizes in Venezuela 8 months later. The movie relates this real history, with a hyphen based on the newspapers of trip published years ago by each one of the protagonists. It shows us the experiences of these youths in its trip where they discover the rich and complex social and human topography of the South American continent and stops especially in the time that both pass in a leper colony of the Amazonia.

*Palabras clave:* Leprosy, Asthma, Social Medicine, Socioeconomic factors, Inequity.

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### Technical details

**Original Title:** *Diarios de motocicleta*

**Country:** USA, Reino Unido, Argentina, Chile, Perú y Francia

**Year:** 2004

**Director:** Walter Salles

**Music:** Gustavo Santaolalla

**Screenwriter:** José Rivera

**Cast:** Gael García Bernal, Rodrigo de la Serna, Mía Maestro, Mercedes Morán, Jean Pierre Noher, Jorge Chiarella, Jaime Azócar, Sofía Bertolotto, Ulises Dumont, Facundo Espinosa, Susana Lanteri y Gustavo Pastorini.

**Color:** color and black and white

**Runtime:** 128 minutos

**Genre:** drama

**Production Companies:** FilmFour, South Fork Pictures, Southfork Pictures, Tu Vas Voir Productions, BD Cine, Inca Films S.A., Sahara Films, Senator Film Produktion GmbH

**Awards and nominations:** Oscar 2004 for best original song (*Al otro lado del río*). Oscar nomination for best writing adapted. San Sebastián International Film Festival 2004, audience award. Cannes Film Festival 2004, François Chalais award, prize of the Ecumenical Jury and technical grand prize. BAFTA Awards 2005, Anthony Asquith award

for film music and best film not in the english language award.

**Sinopsis:** The hyphen of this movie that relates a real trip carried out by two Argentine youths in the decade of the 50, is based on two books writings by the protagonists and published does already various years; *Notes of trip*, of Ernesto Che Guevara and *With the Che by Latin America*, of Alberto Select. The story tried to respond with seriousness to the letter of these books, because although the hyphen has left sideways especially political every connotation, the producers were conscious that the processing of the youth of this mythical revolutionary personage of the 20th century, as came be the CHE Guevara should be extremely careful with the facts.

For that reason, besides doing a deep historic investigation and reaching for two years the places that they both traveled, they interviewed the widow and children of the Che in Cuba and they requested the advising of Alberto Granado who is still alive and working as a biochemist in Cuba. Being 82 years old he has been present in part of the filming, in the premiere of the movie and in its presentation in the festival of Cannes. The filming of the movie carried 84 days was carried out in 33 settings and save exceptions in the same places by the ones that they traveled the protagonists.

## The Movie

The history begins showing the pleasant life of the young one Ernesto in the city of Cordoba in the middle of an accommodated middle-class family. It is there when Alberto his 29 th years old friend from Cordoba tells him that he had planned to celebrate his 30 th birthday, having a long trip through America. He shows him in the map the route carefully planned that would carry them through 12.000 kilometers (figure 1) and that would travel in an old motorcycle Norton of 500 c.c. of rolled flat to which they call *La Poderosa* one (figure 2).



Figure 1: Alberto showing to Ernesto the route he has planned for their journey



Figure 2: Alberto and Ernesto riding on the motorcycle *La Poderosa*

The family of Ernesto was not very according to this project, given that they wanted him to first finish his studies and they were also worried because of the problem of the asthma that their son suffered since he was an infant. In spite of the controversies, he decides to accept the proposal of his friend and in December 29, 1951 with scarce funds and insufficient luggage they abandon Cordoba to the city of Miramar, in the Atlantic coast, where Chichina, the aristocratic girlfriend of Ernesto, usually goes in summer.

The friends travel through Argentina for four weeks, arrive at the beautiful city of Bariloche and cross the mountain range toward the Chilean side to

the city of Temuco where they try to solve the problems with the motorcycle.

Although Ernesto always is timid and quiet, he decides to make a small joke and makes a newspaper publish its arrival as that one of two qualified doctors. The people of the town, when they read the news, give them free food, dwelling and free mechanical arrangements. This scene shows clearly the respect that that title awoke in the simple and poor people in those times. Unfortunately the handsome youth wife of the mechanic puts their eyes in Ernesto, and when the husband realizes this fact, they had to run away from the city in a hurry. In this career they collide with a herd of cows that causes a tremendous damage to *La Poderosa*.

The duet then travels to the Chilean city of The Angels in the area of behind of a truck to consult with a mechanic. While they expect the diagnosis, someone requests to Ernesto that examine a sick elder. He quickly accepts and as he carries with himself medicines, with them he can help the lady. When he returns he listens the bad news, *La Poderosa* cannot be repaired and they should abandon it. Alberto is desolate, but Ernesto convinces him to continue with the trip and to honor the memorable day of its thirtieth birthday. They then do auto stop to Valparaíso and they continue on foot through the burning Desert of Atacama.

Exhausted and hungry, they begin to share the luck of the migrant workers. They know thus to a couple impoverished that has been despoiled of its lands on account of its political ideas, and that travels toward a nearby mine with the hope to find work. Ernesto and Alberto are beginning to know a Latin America different from the one they had seen from there motorcycle, when they passed fast by the cities.

They continue their trip toward the north and they arrive at Chuquicamata's mines (figure 3) still in Chilean territory. In that zone is the largest mine of copper open cut in the world. At that time, the mine was in the hands of an American business the "*Anaconda Copper Mining Co.*", that treated their miners in an inhuman way, but as they were very far away from the cities, the workers of the place did not have another option for their subsistence, some even arrived at the place after a long way, to be able to obtain work. Once there, they expected patiently every day without food neither water the to be selected by the foreman, and in case they were not chosen,

according to the movie, not even water to drink was given to them, with a cruel treatment, which makes young Ernesto desperate.

From there, they travel to Peru, arriving at Machu Pichu, where the sight of its incredible architecture astonishes them. There is a boy in the place that shows them the old wonders of the Inca Empire. This is one of the scenes of the film that the director refers to like not glided, during this last passage of the trip, the main characters do not relate with actors but with people of the place that are simply caught in their simplicity, in a territory, where it seems that the time has stopped.



Figure 3: Miners from the mining town of Chuquicamata

In Lima they know Dr. Hugo Pesce<sup>1</sup>, militant doctor of the Communist Party and one of the most important researchers about leprosy in Latin America at those times, and founder of a Center for Lepers in Huambo (figure 4). He himself writes them a letter of recommendation to negotiate them a probationary period in the leper colony of San Pablo in the Amazonia, which had the greatest colony of lepers in Latin America.

Then they initiate the trip in the ship *La Cenepa* and during the long crossing, Ernesto suffers a severe asthma attack and must remain in bed and it is



Figure 4: Ernesto and Dr. Pesce



Figure 5: Ernesto talking to a leprosy patient



Figure 6: Leprosy patient

during its convalescence when he takes advantage to write its newspaper.

When they arrive at the leper colony of San Pablo in the Amazonia, they observe the stiff norms of sanitary care and conduct of separation that was used with the sick at that time, and that the nuns that managed the place severely imposed. It should be avoided any direct contact with them and was indispensable to use gloves at every moment, including to shake hands with them<sup>2</sup>. Besides the lepers lived in an island separated from the professionals and they were only visited by them during the day.

Both friends are faced to this situation of segregation and isolation refusing to accept it and they enjoy talking and knowing the problems of the sick (figure 5). It is shown in the movie some histories of the life of the leprous (figure 6) and the work that carried out both in the leper colony (figure 7).

The relation among them and the sick begins to be tightened so much, that the day of its birthday number 24, after the celebration of the same one in a festival that organizes the personal place, Ernesto decides to cross to I swim the river, to continue the feast With the lepers. What was a real anecdote and still is commented for the sick that continue alive since that epoch and they recall to the travelers, the movie takes charge of become a climax epic loaded



Figure 7: Ernesto working in a leprosarium

of symbolism. It uses it to present the impulse and the courage of that youth that splits of Argentina being an asthmatic and timid boy and that after the experiences lived suffers a transformation that does the capable of be dared in spite of its problem to face this challenge.



Figure 8: Alberto and Ernesto aboard the raft *Mambo-Tango*



Figure 9: Real photo of Ernesto and Alberto aboard the raft *Mambo-Tango*

In the middle at night disobeying the strict orders of the nuns unexpectedly he dove into the water. The people gathered in both coasts; his friend and the rest of the personnel were on a side and insisting to return, given the danger of that action, and on the other coast, the community of ill people of the leper colony that couldn't understand what happened.

The proper visual management of the narration moves the view towards the other edge and the essence of this story is excellently grasped in the winning song of the Oscar that goes *"I believe that I have seen a light on the other side of the river...."*<sup>3</sup>.

This scene summarizes, in an allegoric form, the transformation of the character in a someone engaged with the sufferings of the people. The following day, he and Raft baptized *Mambo-Tango*, that is a gift from the residents of the colony (figure 8), of which there is even a photo of that time (figure 9). Passing by Colombia, finally they arrive at Venezuela and the distance that they have traveled through can no longer be measured in kilometers, the trip towards the heart torn of Latin America has aroused very deep feelings in both of them.

Then a scene shows Ernesto at the entrance of the airplane who would return to Buenos Aires to finish his course of studies to be a doctor and the image of his friend saying good-bye. In the last scene, he finishes replacing this image by the real Alberto, currently in his eighties, repeating the gesture of the farewell to a friend half a century later. An adventure that finishes and another story that begins.

The film finishes there, but the story of the main characters continues. One, Alberto, will return to work to Argentina with renewed intentions, until the call of his friend from Cuba for a project on training for new doctors for the island<sup>4</sup>. From that day, he lives in the Havana and there he has developed his career as a biologist specialized in biotechnology. Already in his eighties, he has enjoyed the incredible experience to accompany in some sections the shooting and to travel after 50 years though such landscapes together with the main characters (figure 10).

Ernesto will return to Buenos Aires to take his last Medicine subjects. (figure 11) Four years later,



Figure 10: Gael García Bernal, Rodrigo de la Serna and Alberto Granados riding on motorcycle

he will go to Mexico and there he will meet with the Cuban opponents and six years later he will already have transformed itself into the “Commander Che Guevara”. He will die in Bolivian’s puna in 1967.



Figure 11: Ernesto Guevara in his younger days

The third character of this story is the Latin American land, that shows to the spectator its beauty and great wealth in minerals and fertile lands, but

which has been devastated and deprived of their fruits for years. This fact has been making the life of its rural inhabitants and the inequity between the different social groups worse, as well as their possibility to access to the health.

The salt mines of Atacama lost their power when natural salt appeared in the market, and they were definitively closed in Chile in 1960, and the towns that surrounded it simply disappeared; the people who lived on that task went through more uprooting and poverty. The Chuquicamata’s copper mines were no longer in North American’s hands because in 1971 they were nationalized, but although the situation of its workers was improving, the sanitary problems still today are very great. The same government has declared that the surrounding area of the melting of Chuquicamata, as saturated zone by sulphate anhydride and particulated material and with a high arsenic emission. Whereas the solution to these problems is found, the workers and their family continue living in these conditions.

The Amazonian forest today is devastated by deforestation, he has even become more inhospitable and rustic; the leprosy has been taken root in that earth, of the hand of the poverty and the inequity. Although from 1980 it is counted on effective treatment has not been possible to eradicate it totally, in spite of the concerted efforts of the WHO to obtain his dream of a world without leprosy in 1999 or at least with a smaller prevalence to the 1/10.000<sup>5</sup>. All the countries could not arrive at this goal and in America, today 5 countries by above even subsist of that value, the zone of the Amazonia on the heart of Latin America is most affected<sup>6</sup>(figure 12).

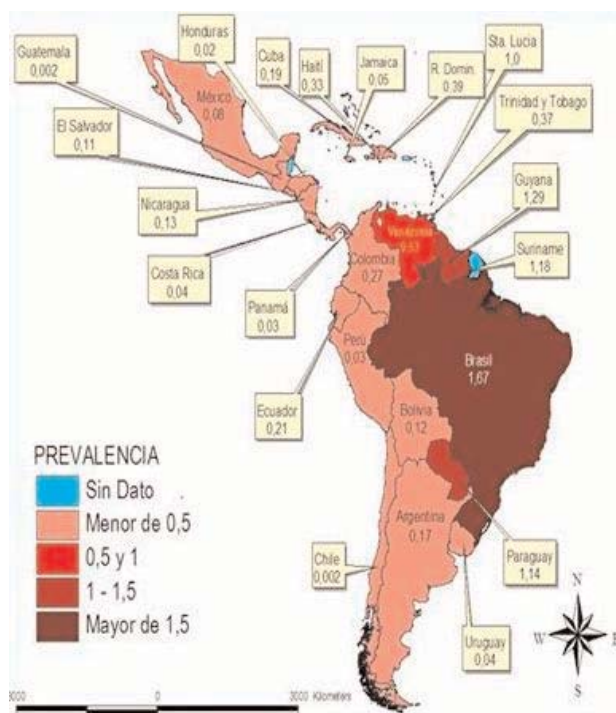


Figure 12: Map of the PAHO showing leprosy prevalence in the Region of the Americas

Although the statistical numbers mark of global way a great reduction of the disease, in the last years, the number of diseases is in the other side of the individual suffering of the people, to whom these advances do not give to benefit to them. So it is true, that when the production arrived at the leprosarium, were some patients who from their adolescence were living there and which they remembered to the travellers

The film tries to avoid very well any political message, except for some images on a brief parliament of Ernesto the day of his birthday. What in this film tries to show at any moment, the transformation that anyone of us could suffer to embark in those incredible trips of self-knowledge, increasing the

understanding of the human being and its sufferings giving a real knowledge of us all. The medicine and its social aspects, that medicine that is beyond the books and whose reality always ends up affirming the old phrase of Don José Letamendi. : *"the doctor who only know of medicine, nor medicine at least know"*<sup>7</sup>.

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