



Imaginary icons

A SOURCE OF FASCINATION for centuries, the life and death of saints have cast a spell over the imagination. Their invincible commitment to a life that venerates the Passion of Christ, wins them, after the performance of a qualifying miracle or two, their seat in heaven on the right hand of the Lord. Capable of stoically accepting dreary duty or of withstanding grotesque tortures, saints are, paradoxically, exemplary figures, which are meant to be admired but not emulated. Saintry men and women are often tough, unappealing in their persons, and capable, like St Bernard, of advocating killings by the bushel, or like the Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, whose pity was without end and whose political cunning was always well garnished with good intentions. Whatever else they may be, saints are not nice. They are not meant to be. Their special and personal relationship with the Son of God and his Mum confers upon them a gravitas which is both awe inspiring and awful to behold.

It is this that gives their images the mystical capacity to empower prayer; it is this that brings all those who gaze faithfully upon them closer to God. The icon is a sacred image that embraces the suffering and the love of God embodied in the life of Christ, Mary, and coach loads of saints. The iconostasis of Orthodox churches, made available by the inspired craftsmanship of the icon painter, conceals the sacred goings on of the priesthood in the sanctuary around the altar from the prying eyes of *hoi polloi* crowded into the nave, forcing

the gaze of all those present to dwell upon the lives of Christ, Mary, and the numberless saints, who have gone before.

I reflected upon all this last Saturday night when I went to my local Odeon to see *Che: Part Two*. I was compelled to see this because I had made the mistake of seeing *Che: Part One*. Of course, like *Titanic* or *Valkyrie*, I knew how *Part Two* would have to end, but I was gripped with the need to know how Steven Soderbergh would take up the story where he left it at the end of *Part One*. Between the first part and the second part Soderbergh leaps over a temporal chasm separating the fall of Santa Clara to Che's revolutionary column on December 31, 1958 and his arrival in Bolivia in 1967. Consequently, we miss Che's five months as the Governor of La Cabaña Fortress where he presided over the wholesale slaughter of several hundred members of the *ancien régime*. We missed his life as a revolutionary bureaucrat, his ill-fated incursion into the war in Congo-Kinshasa, and perhaps, most importantly, the tension between him and Fidel Castro concerning relations with the Soviet Union and Che's desire to emulate the intransigence of Mao Zedong by his forthright rejection of a policy of 'peaceful co-existence' with imperialism.

You might think that all this politicking would not be photogenic or filmic and you might be right, but if a biopic is not to be simply hagiography it must surely give us a portrait, as Oliver Cromwell advised, warts and all. This, Soderbergh has failed to do. In fact, he has not given us much of a portrait of Ernesto Guevara Lynch at all. After around four and a half hours of film we know little about why Che did anything apart from banal observations concerning poverty and oppression. It is never clear what Che proposes to do about it apart from murdering the oppressors and their soldiers. Indeed in the most memorable scene in *Part Two*, after hearing about the new roads, schools and hospitals promised by the revolution, a taciturn Bolivian peasant says "Yes, that would be nice."

Soderbergh's brilliant direction of the films and Benicio del Toro's entirely convincing portrayal of Che have left us with the tale of a man who believed in the power of moral integrity and the cleansing power of revolutionary violence and terror in which the purposes of the suffering, fear, and killing, remains obscure and fathomless. The filmmaker and the actor have become locked into the socialist tradition in which neither tyranny nor defeat is allowed to dislodge or undermine the rightness of the cause, nor the intrinsic virtue of the man made more of a man by revolutionary commitment and sacrifice.

This is, after all, as Rider Haggard might have said, "a tale of men and boys" in which Haydée Tamara Bunke Bider, the former Stasi agent better known as Tania, lets the side down either by working for the KGB or by an excess of dizziness and feminine incompetence. Indeed, she does more than let the side down; she unwittingly leads the enemy, who are assiduously following her, to the entrance of Che's jungle camp. The rest, as they say, is history.

But what a peculiar history it is? The deployment of images taken from Alberto Korda's 1960 photograph of the saintly Guevara, rescuing folk from a violent accident in Havana, has led to his likeness being universally spoken of as an "icon", an "icon" of revolutionary youth, and as an "icon" of resistance to imperialism, to capitalism, and all that is regarded as rotten in the world.

This is a persistent and strange idea given that images of Ernesto "Che" Guevara are manifestly not icons. These images on T-shirts, mugs, key rings, and posters adorning the walls of student bedrooms and the offices of professors hankering after their lost youth, do not take the gaze of the faithful to contemplation of the suffering and sacrifice of the revolutionary. These images do not hold the viewer in the embrace of Che's aspirations. Indeed, it is not necessary to know who or what the image represents, or what he apparently 'stood for' before donning the T-shirt or readying the drawing pins or the Blu-Tack. The

image can often be conflated with images of Bob Marley, Jimmy Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, and of course, with the laconic and lethal superficiality of Andy Warhol.

The deployment of images of Che does not imply enthusiasm or sympathy for the man's activities or the revolutionary fables that he chose to tell to all who would listen. These prints, photographs and stencils, are certainly not icons. In this they reflect the peculiar manner in which the efforts of Soderbergh and Benicio del Toro have sought to emulate the vacuity of Guevara. Guevara was a man consumed by failure, a man driven, like Cuba itself, to failure by the victory of the revolution. His images, like the movie, like the man, have hollowed out the revolution leaving only the bright surface to shield us from a terrifying absence.