

Che!

Stolen from the grave

Jeff Shero

1969

"In culture, capitalism has given all that it had to give and all that remains of it is the foretaste of a bad-smelling corpse."

—Che Guevara, *Man & Socialism in Cuba*

Liberation News Service — Twentieth Century-Fox's sense of the box office hasn't diminished. Last year they produced such money-makers as "Valley of the Dolls," "Boston Strangler," and "Planet of the Apes."

Now with Amerikan society rotting around it, Fox, seated in two capitals of decay—New York and Hollywood—understands that revolution contains a bit of spicy glamour.

It's obvious. Kids used to dream of being baseball stars or FBI agents; now they grow their hair long and want to be rock stars or revolutionaries.

This new trend doesn't worry corporate film-makers. As long as the subject can be glamorized, the reality transformed into "Hollywood," film producers are happy.

Darryl F. Zanuck, president of Fox, believes he hit on a new theme. Besides the soon to be released movie on the life of Che, work is underway on an adventure film called "The Chairman," which involves an American scientist, Gregory Peck, entering China, debating Chairman Mao and escaping with a food production secret; and "The Confessions of Nat Turner," a white view which explains the leader of the slave revolt in terms of his own sexual repression.

The scheduled film on Che, though, is a perfect example of the vulgarization of revolutionary values.

"Che!" begins in rapid fire. Scenes of youth rebellion are interspersed with shots of Che's dead body, intercut with the picture credits. The style is documentary. The script reads:

FADE IN

INT. SCHOOLROOM — HIGUERAS — HIGH ANGLE SHOT — DAY.

The room is no more than a hut, devoid of furniture except for a rude table. Che Guevara's bullet-ridden body lies on the table. The room is dark, but a beam of light from one small window falls on Che's face.

As camera moves in slowly on the face, we hear softly:

CHE'S VOICE

Wherever death may surprise us, it will be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, reach some receptive ear.

EXT. A SQUARE — WEST BERLIN — LONG SHOT — DAY (STOCK) CUT TO:

A student orator is exhorting massed student demonstrators. We are engulfed in a wave of sound as the young rebels roar.

HEAD CLOSEUP — CHE

Pale, serene in death. The tumult fades.

CHE'S VOICE

... that another hand stretch out to take up weapons and that other men come forward to intone our funeral dirge with the staccato of machine guns.

The main title appears.

EXT. A BARRICADED STREET — THE SORBONNE — DAY (STOCK)

Another tumult. French students at their barricades pelt a phalanx of police with stones and bottles. A second title appears. As successive titles appear, closeups of the dead Che are intercut with shots of rebellious youth throughout the world. (Whenever possible, these scenes should be drawn from stock footage.)

We see:

A. DISSIDENT STUDENTS AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY in possession of an administration building.

B. A YOUNG MAN AND HIS GIRL on a motor scooter in some European city. Painted on his crash helmet are the words: "CHE."

C. A KNOT OF STUDENTS IN THE "free speech" area of the Berkeley campus, applauding a young speaker.

D. A FORMATION OF RED GUARDS IN PEKING. All the youths hold the little red book, and they chant in unison a slogan of Chairman Mao.

E. A TATTERED AND PEELING WALL POSTER with Che's portrait on it. A girl cyclist pauses to gaze at the poster.

F. OUT

G. AS THE LAST TITLE FADES, CLOSE ON AN AMERICAN GIRL — DAY. She is standing in the portals of some campus building, it doesn't matter where. There are books under her arm and on her breast a large button with the words: MAKE LOVE NOT WAR. She is lovely and her eyes brim with tears as she faces the camera, addressing an unseen listener.

THE GIRL

I can't believe it. Che isn't really dead, is he?

Even as the film begins the political conditions which moved Che, the doctor, to become Che, the revolutionary thinker and guerrilla leader, are ignored.

Instead of portraying a man with the highest sense of morality who could not ignore the need of the impoverished, Che is transformed into an adventurer—the existential man who must have the excitement of battle to test himself.

The movie begins quoting Che:

"Wherever death may surprise us..." but leaves out the beginning of the quote which would prove to be too unsettling for American audiences. The first line Che wrote was: "Our every action is a battle cry against imperialism

and a call for the people's unity against the great enemy of mankind, the United States of America. Wherever death may surprise us...

Accuracy in the case of Che would be to film an indictment of the world role of the United States; instead Fox embraces "objectivity."

Their objectivity, according to Fox publicity releases, embraces neither left or right but gives an "unbiased, impartial view of the dramatic highlights of the martyred revolutionist."

To Fox this means battle scenes and minute attention to detail. Omar Sharif, who plays Che, wears Che's clothes, smokes Che's pipe, places the star on the beret exactly like Che, etc. (Close attention to Fox's detail shows, however, that Sharif is wearing U.S. Army issue buttons.) Similarly the battle scenes are filmed with a surprising degree of attention to detail.

But an "objective film" complete with detail isn't necessarily a truthful film. Truth is found in motives and values, the obscure reasons behind actions, not in recounting the superficial actions themselves.

For his portrayal of Che, Omar Sharif read voluminously, and gives Che credit for pricking his social conscience: "I read Newspapers now."

In an interview Sharif offers this insight into Che, "I think I know more about Che than anyone. He is basically a man who wanted to put his life in danger. He was a cerebral person living out of his brain. It is difficult for an actor to do a man without emotions on the screen."

Contrast this to the real Che who wrote, "Let me say, at the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality."

Che believed that man must live his beliefs. He left the revolution in Cuba to begin anew in Bolivia with the hope of spreading the movement from his mountain base to nearby Argentina, Paraguay, Peru and Chile.

Even if he wasn't killed, the choice of opening another guerrilla front in the Andes meant leaving the relative comfort of the Cuban Economic Ministry for the bodily torture that is part of the daily life of a guerrilla.

Without self pity or sentimentality, the asthmatic Che in his Bolivian diary for August 1967 wrote, "It was, without any doubt, the worst month we have had since the war started. The loss of all caves containing the documents and the medicine is a hard blow, above all psychologically. The loss of two men at the end of the month and the subsequent march on horseback demoralized the men and provoked the first case of giving up, Camba, which would be advantageous under different circumstances, but not under these.

"The lack of contact with the outside, with Joaquin, and the fact that the prisoners taken from him have talked, also demoralized the troops a little. My illness caused uncertainty in several Others and all this was reflected in our first encounter, in which we should have caused several losses but wounded only one. On the other hand the difficult march through the mountains without water brought out some of the negative aspects in the men."

After preparing for his part, Sharif judges the inner Che's motivation in his own unique way, "He thought the world was a lousy place, particularly his part of the world. And he knew he couldn't do anything about it. But he tried...Knowing that he couldn't change the world, he knew also that he was going to die—fighting. He was obviously quite masochistic; he liked to punish his own flesh."

Yet, even when a corporation begins a project to make profits there still remains a certain latitude for a creative artist's interpretation of his work.

Except for Jack Palance (Fidel Castro) who studied the history of U.S.-Cuban relations and sympathizes with what Fidel did in making the revolution, there is no sophisticated view of revolution in the film crew.

Sharif has said repeatedly, "He failed in life. His death was his great success, because he accomplished nothing in his lifetime."

The director, Richard Fleischer, apparently immersed in his recent success "Doctor Doolittle," assesses: "No one had ever heard of Che Guevara until he died."

Robert Loggia, TV star of "T.H.E. Cat," who plays an anti-Guevara Major in the film offers: "He was a bum wandering around Argentina; wondering what to do with himself."

The film creates an emotionless man, James Bond-like cool in the crunch, but devoid of humanity. They don't understand Che as a man who responds to the crimes he finds around him.

It's like a group of men blind to why ghetto blacks become Black Panthers, college students rebel, or young men burn draft cards, who got together at a Hugh Hefner-like party, slightly drunk, and decided "Che!" was a cool idea. The dissipation of their lives turns into a sordid joke on screen.

Afterward these people say they are presenting a serious, objective study of the life of a man who the CIA has assessed to have had "greater impact on inter American policy than any man since Joseph Stalin." They then present a version as neatly packaged as the latest revolutionary miracle in dish washing, and with just as much honesty.

In Hollywood part of this formula is sexy girls. Che gets his offers, but he doesn't partake. In the script, Tania, girl revolutionary Linda Marsh, fresh from Mod Squad, pulls up before Che's La Paz hotel.

In Bolivia she lost her life fighting with the guerrillas. In Hollywood, she's a lay.

The script reads:

The girl looks up at him with tender expectation.

TANIA: Shall I come up to your room? later?

CHE: No.

TANIA: You think it's too risky?

CHE: No. It's just...self indulgent.

To the lack of insight into Che the man is added a horrendous script by Michael Wilson, which totally distorts history.

Wilson's Che reacts like a madman during the Cuban Missile crisis, raging at Fidel for allowing the Russians to withdraw their missiles, calling the Soviet Ambassador a shit, and screaming at President Dorticos: "I didn't turn Cuba into a hog trough for a sleazy politician."

Because Fidel stands steady during the crisis, Che is dismayed and decides Fidel is a coward, a sell-out to the world revolution. At this point he is through with Cuba.

In the following scene Che comes to Fidel to tell him of his departure, and finds him in bed, dissipated, gulping brandy and popping Benzedrine. It's clear that Fidel has fallen into disrepair, an indecisive shell of his former self. Che is almost contemptuous.

Che and Fidel, of course, had the closest cooperation in reality. Che was Cuba's chief liaison with other revolutionary movements.

Secretly he went on a mission to the Congo to support Lumumba forces; he organized a training school of guerrillas in Cuba; and he worked carefully with Fidel preparing the forces that were to locate themselves in Bolivia.

The carefully thought through strategy of creating guerrilla foci like Vietnam through out the world in order that each uprising wouldn't have to face the full force of American counterinsurgency resulted from the plans of the best revolutionary minds.

Che's operation relied on the deepest imaginable trust, as well as unfailing cooperation. The movie's wasted and raving Fidel Castro is a typical Latin American dictator, then the question of the U.S. economic blockade of Cuba need never be asked.

If Fox presented Fidel and Che attempting the economic restructuring of Cuba and possessed by the dream that the energies of all Latin American nations could be released for their own benefit, then the whole United States policy in Latin America would by implication be called into question. The movie, of course suppresses the critical political questions involved, and flits on to other superficial distortions.

One distortion committed by omission is the Bay of Pigs attack sponsored by the United States. This, one of the key incidents in shaping Cuba's thinking, isn't even mentioned. If it were, then the movie would have to deal with the fact that during the invasion, Cubans rallied to the Communist government and defended themselves against attack.

The battle of the Bay of Pigs would have been Hollywood cinema, except that it resulted in a victory which proved the popularity of the government. The screen writer chose instead to concentrate on the Bolivian campaign which ended in Che's death.

Later in the movie version, in the mountains of Bolivia, Che, hardened by defects, begins to despise the peasants. He is portrayed as violating the essential revolutionary maxim, berating peasants as “slop-pigs” and “cowards.”

It’s this hatred of the peasants that leads to the ultimate demise of the guerrilla band in the movie version—a peasant turns them in to the army.

This hatred for the peasants, fearful of supporting the guerrillas, contradicts the thoughtful analysis of his encounters, with the peasants found in Che’s Bolivian diary.

Fidel wrote of this problem in the introduction to the diary, underscoring Che’s understanding of the situation: “Che had numerous contacts with the peasants. Their character, extremely mistrustful and wary, didn’t surprise him, as he knew their mentality perfectly for having dealt with them on other occasions and he knew that prolonged, patient, and arduous work was required to win them over to the cause. But he never harbored any doubt that this would be obtained in the long run.”

Che wasn’t killed because a peasant turned him in as the movie suggests. Che was killed because the CIA combined with an American counterinsurgency effort organized at the highest levels of our government utilized its full technological advantage to trap him.

Major Ralph W. “Poppy” Shelton was placed in charge of training Bolivian counterinsurgency forces. U.S. intelligence learned that the guerrilla band used a Dien Bien Phu oven, an oven developed by the Vietnamese, which gave out no smoke, but did emit a concentration of heat.

Immediately planes were sent to crisscross the entire guerrilla zone using heat-seeking image-amplifying techniques which convert heat into visible light on special high speed emulsion films. Through a process of elimination of heat generating sources, Che’s band was located.

It was then only a small job to ensnare the band. But, unlike the film’s account, U.S. techniques perfected in Vietnam were responsible, not hostile peasantry.

What Twentieth Century-Fox has attempted is to create a saleable product which doesn’t threaten the cozy assumptions of its audience.

A corporation will sell anything which makes profits, including revolution. The men inside the corporate structure from actors to screen writers must be aware of this goal—first to make money for the company, second to express their creative insights as men.

The smartest, those most aware of the changes going on in this society, have the highest values. Their understanding represents the future marketing possibilities for the corporation.

As long as a man doesn’t value his integrity too highly, there’s plenty of money for all. The good men within the structure either get out, or are slowly corrupted until they cynically spit out their distaste at the bar every evening while creating rationalizations for their work.

Jack Palance probably has convinced himself that his work in portraying a degenerate Castro is somehow positive. Omar Sharif and the others don’t seem thoughtful enough to care.

Sitting at the head of the corporate table, directing their empires, the men like Darryl Zanuck and his board of directors who have no thought of integrity. Their concern with Che is will he sell?

One of the problems of salesmanship is of course promoting their film in such a way that it appeals to the public. For a movie like “Che!” they buy mod young ad agents who can whip up the kind of campaign that stirs controversy and curiosity, but which doesn’t endanger the product.

But America is changing too fast. Young Americans begin to connect the ideals that Che fought for to their own lives.

They see their revolts in high schools, universities, in ghettos and even in the army itself, as part of the same international battle of which Che was a part.

For Twentieth Century-Fox to make a slick, rounded life of Che with Omar Sharif is an insult. It takes the best of what life can represent and makes it cheap, another commodity to take profits from.

America’s changing too fast. It’s time now to understand the seriousness of the rebellion going on in America and the third world.

Despite its slick promotion, “Che!” will probably cause too much of a storm, and the neatly calculated corporate gamble will backfire into a long-term loss.

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