# Watching narratives of travel-as-transformation in *The Beach* and *The Motorcycle Diaries*

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The attention recently accorded to feature films, in tourism studies, has been mostly driven by the idea that cinema has the ability to provoke in the viewer a sense of anticipation regarding a given or potential tourist destination. Films, however, also play a not so negligible role in shaping our notions of what a tourist experience should be. One of the most common tropes in travel or tourism-related films has been the trope of the journey as a transformative or 'life-changing experience'. This paper explores the connections between this recurrent trope and the classical narrative film. Consisting, broadly, of a character-centred narrative in which events are organised by causal logic, moving towards the resolution of an initial problem or crisis, the classical narrative film relies heavily upon the idea of change (the turning-point which prepares the way for denouement), and is therefore particularly prone to depictions of tourism as a life-changing experience. Despite innovations introduced from the 1960s onwards, most mainstream travel films still follow this narrative scheme. My paper analyses two of these films, *The Beach* (2000, dir. Danny Boyle) and *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004, dir. Walter Salles), which have been widely discussed in relation to tourism, underlining how they support notions of travelling as a source of transformation, sidestepping more banal kinds of experiences. Drawing on a large sample of online film reviews, I argue that viewers are not unaware of this bias, which they often reproduce, comment upon and challenge.

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In his influential book, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dean MacCannell spelled out the distinction between 'actual tourists', the group he was interested in studying sociologically, and 'the tourist' as a type, i.e. in a 'metasociological' sense, as 'one of the best models available for modern-man-in-general' (MacCannell, 1999, p. 1). The focus of MacCannell's work clearly fell on the latter aspect, and this would become the favoured angle from which the first wave of subsequent studies would come to approach tourism. The idea that tourists have a plurality of motivations and engage a plurality of experiences has, nevertheless, prevailed in more recent, ethnographic-based work, with the scholarly interest in 'the tourist' gradually giving way to the study of actual tourists.

And yet, if there is a context in which speaking of 'ideal types' makes sense, this is the context of film, and of feature films in particular. Feature films rely on types and myths (namely, at the level of characters and the storyline) to make themselves intelligible to a wider audience. Tourism's myth-making capabilities have been well established (Rojek, 1997; Selwyn, 1996) and there has been a shift in recent years, in the growing literature on cinema and tourism, from scenery-centred approaches, with which concepts like 'anticipation' have normally been associated (Urry, 2002), to the recognition of the role of myths, themes, characters and storylines (Beeton, 2005; Buchmann, Moore, and Fisher, 2010; Frost, 2010; Riley et al., 1998) in boosting the

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viewers' interest in cinematic places. Most of this work, however, has failed to engage the textuality of films, being mostly concerned with their role in promoting tourism, either as a generalised modern/postmodern practice – as in the thesis of 'cinematic tourism' (Gibson, 2006; Strain, 2003; Tzanelli, 2007) – or in relation to a specific destination – as in research on 'film-induced tourism' (Beeton, 2005; Carl, Kindon, and Smith, 2007; Riley, Baker, and Van Doren, 1998).

The assumption that underpins my work on cinema and tourism, on the other hand, is that films cannot be reduced to tourism promotional aims, as they are deeply embedded and implicated in other social practices. As Urry has pointed out, the 'visual consumption' of places involves the recognition, and consequent de-coding, of signs (1992, p.172), which turns tourist places and situations into texts and tourists into 'semioticians' (Culler, 1981). Films capture, reproduce and re-encode these signs, partaking of a vaster 'global sign industry' (Tzanelli, 2007), but also convoking other layers of signification. They certainly provide a source of entertainment (which might or might not extend to actual, corporeal tourism), but they also help us to make sense of and communicate about the world, being part of the interactive and highly mediated process of social theorization (not least about tourism) that takes place across society, in formal and informal contexts.

In a recent article, Warwick Frost (2010) argued that some of the most successful films set in the Australian Outback and associated with the promotion of tourism to Australia depicted tourism as a 'life-changing experience'. My own research points in this direction, since most of the tourism-related films I have encountered (especially films with tourists or travellers as protagonists) tend to incorporate this notion.[1] In this article I examine *The Beach* (dir. Danny Boyle, 2000) and *The Motorcycle Diaries* (*Diarios de Motocicleta*, dir. Walter Salles, 2004), which have been widely discussed in relation to tourism. These are two strongly gender-marked films, in which the protagonists are adventurous males in search of 'something more dangerous' (*The Beach*) or some vague political ideal (*The Motorcycle Diaries*). Their feminine equivalents can be found in what has been called the 'romantic travel movie' (Clapp, 2009), where a female protagonist is placed at the centre of the journey, with romance being the 'life-changing experience' *par excellence*.[2] My approach to *The Beach* and *The Motorcycle Diaries* involves a combination of film analysis and online ethnography. The latter is based on the viewers' responses to these films posted on the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB), one of the most popular international fan websites, consisting of 532 reviews of *The Beach* (written between January 2000 and November 2013) and 289 reviews of *The Motorcycle Diaries* (written between January 2004 and September 2013).

Despite its limitations as a method (cf. Tzanelli, 2007, pp. 18–19), this kind of 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000) allows us to access the viewers' perceptions of these films in relation to travelling and transformation. Since I have limited my engagement with the Internet to web content analysis, excluding any kind of researcher-informant, online-offline interaction, the term 'ethnography' is likely to raise some eyebrows. However, the fact that these reviews are part of a network of relations and affects suggests that they are more than just texts. Indeed, reviewers are aware of each other's reviews (which they often quote, endorse and contest) and the film's general ratings, to which they hope to contribute. Even though we cannot be sure about their identities, information about the authors' age, gender, class, nationality and interests often

transpires or can be inferred. Reviews are also 'thick' in other respects, such as the viewing occasions (the film's theatrical release, the DVD release, television broadcast), frequency (repeat viewings can lead to a change of opinion, sometimes in a self-reflexive way) and associated personal experiences (e.g. a viewer of *The Beach* was on a first date with her husband-to-be, another was on vacation in Thailand). Finally, more could be learned through the cross-analysis of an author's other reviews, but I have not followed this lead.

Based on the films and their reviews, I argue that the trope of the journey as a transformative or life-changing experience is structural both to the plots and to the way these films are to appeal to viewers. In fact, this trope appears to be closely connected to the classical narrative form, which has come to shape our prevalent notions of what a film is supposed to be. Consisting, broadly speaking, of a character-centred chain of events organised by causal logic that moves from an initial problem to its final solution (which arrives towards the end of the film), the classical narrative film relies heavily on the idea of change (the turning-point which prepares the way for denouement), and is therefore particularly prone to depictions of tourism as a life-changing experience. Given that this understanding of travelling is dominant in mainstream films, which have the widest distribution and receive the highest exposure to viewers, it is likely that films may be contributing to the general tendency to describe journeys as sources of 'transformations, enlightenment, life-changing events, and consciousness-changing events' (Collins-Kreiner, 2009, p. 445). What I have in mind are mutually reinforcing influences, rather than a one-way, cause and effect relationship, between the way travel is being depicted in films and the way we have come to perceive, theorise, and even experience it. On the other hand, it is important to stress that viewers themselves are not unaware of these depictions, which they often engage with, challenge or mobilise for their own purposes. The idea of travelling as a life-changing experience is central in both *The Beach* and *The Motorcycle Diaries*. Viewers, however, voice doubts concerning this premise, drawing attention to unresolved theoretical issues, namely: how do we assess change? How can we be sure that the protagonist has been transformed by the tourist experience? And how do travel and narrative expectations influence our perception of these issues?

## 'I don't get it': Making sense of travel-as-transformation in *The Beach*

> My name is Richard. So what else do you need to know? Stuff about my family or where I'm from? None of that matters, not once you cross the ocean and cut yourself loose looking for something more beautiful, something more exciting and, yes, I admit, something more dangerous.

These words are uttered by Richard (Leonardo DiCaprio), the protagonist and voice-over narrator of *The Beach* (2000), in the film's opening sequence. Richard is a young American backpacker who has travelled to Thailand in search of an adventurous, life-changing and anti-touristic experience. After initial disappointment in Bangkok, he stumbles upon a map that leads him and two travel companions to a remote island. Here, away from the indiscreet gazes of the tourist 'hordes', he finally finds what he has been looking for, namely: beauty in the shape of a paradisiacal beach, where he is fully accepted into a pleasure-seeking community of fellow Western travellers. Described as 'a lost world, a full-scale community of travellers not just passing through, but actually

living here' and as 'a beach resort for people who don't like beach resorts', the beach turns out to be a short-term illusion: Richard's love affair with the beautiful Françoise (Virginie Ledoyen) ends abruptly; a shark attack reveals the darker side of the secretive community; the relationship with the local farmers (who are, in fact, gun-carrying marijuana growers) becomes strained; and Richard plunges into temporary madness, enacting a commando, Vietnam-inspired fantasy that culminates in the death of three newly-arrived tourists. After killing a dying man, Richard is finally captured by the farmers' leader, who forces the whole community to disband and leave the island. The anti-touristic dream is therefore exposed as yet another tourist fantasy: the aesthetic/ hedonistic experience proves ephemeral and, in the end, everybody must go home or, at least, return to the normal tourist circuits. The film closes with Richard in an Internet café contemplating the picture of the beach community that Françoise has sent him, a memento of an idyllic past that is now forever lost.

Though not as successful as the book on which it was based (Alex Garland's eponymous novel, published in 1996), *The Beach* rapidly became something of a cult film for a generation of young backpackers. It also captured the attention of academics, inspiring discussions about 'cinematic tourism' (Tzanelli, 2006, 2007) and tourism in general (Law, Bunnell, and Ong, 2007). These and other scholars have highlighted how the film aligned itself with an idealised, 'tropicalised' image, with Orientalist overtones (Law et al., 2007, pp. 146–147), of what a paradisiacal beach should look like (Tzanelli, 2006, p. 135). This was accomplished through computer-generated images and the actual 're-vamping' of the main shooting location, Maya Bay, set in the island of Ko Phi Phi Leh, in Thailand, which involved replacing native dune vegetation by palm trees (Law et al. 2007, p. 148). Unlike the novel, a satire of 'the Western search for experiential authenticity through travel' (Tzanelli, 2006, p. 121), the film reinforced these feelings, not only visually, through the eye-catching images of a tropical 'paradise', but also narratively, through Richard's story.

Told retrospectively and in the first-person, Richard's story is first and foremost the story of a journey. The two elements cannot be separated: in keeping with the archetypical travelling experience (as described by the likes of John Urry and Dean MacCannell), this journey is rendered as the expression of a more general desire to escape 'normal' everyday life (including family and work-related activities), in order to experience new, extraordinary things, such as drinking snake blood in the streets of Bangkok, smoking dope with a stranger, or even falling in love for the first time. The only time we see him calling home, during a visit to the mainland to buy supplies for the beach community, Richard tells his parents, 'I like it out here, you know? Things are different.' Most importantly, all these experiences are presented as part of a process of self-transformation, in such a way that concepts like 'rite of passage', 'communitas', 'liminal'/ 'liminoid' and 'pilgrimage' (as differently developed by van Gennep, Victor Turner and Nelson Graburn) can be effectively mobilised to produce a comprehensive reading of the film, as Rodhanti Tzanelli has demonstrated (2006, pp. 124-127).

The film's reception on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) suggests that viewers themselves related to some of these concepts, albeit in complex ways. In general, *The Beach* received extremely negative reviews. Most fans of Garland's novel were particularly disappointed, dismissing it as 'a let down' (gizmo-33 from New York, 2 September 2000), 'a classic story written by Alex Garland – Destroyed by Danny Boyle & co.' (cat-12 from Dublin, Ireland, 20 February 2000), and 'an embarrassing

adaption of a stylish book' (mnelson-3 from New York, 12 February 2000). Most critiques were directed at the director's capitulation to Hollywood and commercialism (which entailed the decision to target DiCaprio's teenage and female fans); the film's lack of realism; the sudden shift of mood in the second part (which becomes darker); its 'derivative style,' from films as different as *The Blue Lagoon*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Lord of the Flies*; and the strange mix of genres and styles (romance, war movie, computer games, MTV video clips, etc.) which results in the loss of a personal, original voice. Many reviewers also had difficulties in empathising with the members of the beach commune (the one glaring exception being Keaty, played by British actor Paterson Joseph), frequently dismissed as hedonists, narcissists, elitists or even fascists. Finally, a few reviews criticised the film's prejudice against and ignorance about Thai people and culture, decrying the fact that it portrayed Thailand as 'a Mecca for dope heads' (Knut Torgersen (knutt) from Drammen, Norway, 22 July 2007) and seeing in it nothing but a 'stoner movie.' The number one critique, however, was the faulty script, especially as far as an overly contrived or deficient plot and a weak ending were concerned (more on this later). According to a reviewer who disliked the film, 'The story simply gets lost in the beautiful landscape' (mary_mlp-2 from florida, 22 February 2000) – a point that even viewers impressed by the landscape were ready to make.

There is no doubt that the film's appeal lay mostly with this visual aspect. Fans of the film were emphatic about the beauty of the photography, especially regarding the natural sceneries, which they often associated with the musical score. The combination of 'stunning' images and (mostly) electronic pop music led many viewers to speak of the film in terms of an 'immersion' or a 'dream'. As a reviewer put it, '*The Beach* is not just a movie, its [sic] an experience' (prashanthmn from India, 7 May 2007). The film's travel theme encouraged sympathetic viewers to find in it either a 'getaway' from everyday life, welcoming the story's 'escapist feel' (Jamie Collins from United Kingdom, 12 March 2008), or an inspiration to engage with some actual travelling. Experienced travellers, however, differed as to the nature and scope of the film's accomplishments, drawing on personal experiences to confirm or disprove aspects like the film's realism or 'message' (a recurrent topic on which there is no agreement). In fact, different travelling experiences seem to motivate different reactions, especially as far as the film's realism is concerned. Hence, while one reviewer is positive that '[i]f you have ever back-packed, you'd find the characters believable' (Jassim Ahmad from Ottawa, Canada, 12 February 2000), another is adamant that '[a]s for the reality, it is not even close', adding, 'I spent two years in the tropics and life is very hard. You are sunburnt all the time, not tan, and sick from the monotony of the food, tropical diseases and storms' (T Mobile from the Local Fluff, 8 April 2006). A female reviewer from New Zealand, who has travelled to Thailand, connects *The Beach* to the 'big OE' (overseas experience), corroborating the film's realism and 'truthfulness':

> I've been a traveller in Thailand. Although Richard's quest and Richard's scene wasn't mine, I've seen it... the beaches, the bars, the snake blood, the dope, the parties. I've also been a high school teacher, and have worked with adolescents hungry to discover 'the real world', to bite into Eve's apple with gusto. (…) So there's a strong element of 'truth' in this story. (Susan Thrasher from Eastbourne, New Zealand, 24 January 2002)

Apart from their travel experiences, viewers also base their opinions on their notions of travel, often formulated along the lines of the traveller-tourist dichotomy. The main readership of Garland's novel had been independent travellers, keen to define themselves against mainstream tourism, even if the book treated this aspect with irony

(Tickell, 2001). Danny Boyle's filmed adaptation inherited this audience; nevertheless, it also failed to meet their expectations. One of the major problems identified by Garland's fans was the film's failure to convincingly mobilise the trope of the journey as a transformative or 'life-changing experience.' Viewers in general, sympathetic or hostile, showed awareness of this trope. That Richard is to 'undergo a transformation of character… hopefully for the better and resolve the situation so that he can continue his journey as a somewhat enlightened or changed person' is clearly stated by this reviewer (Reno-16 from Hollywood, CA USA, 13 February 2000) and made implicit by many others. Nevertheless, while the novel is seen as successfully conveying a sense of transformation through travel, the film is frequently criticised for failing to register any change in Richard. A reviewer who disliked both the film and the book, and who sounds sarcastic about the 'journey-as-transformation' motif, is nevertheless clear about this point:

> [the novel] purports to tell us all what traveling is like and the wonderous things that happen to us and make us (deep breath for a wonderful americanism) 'grow'. (…) at least the book had the decency to admit that when richard went back to the world that he looked back at his time at the beach as though he was a different person. but no, what we get is leonard looking at a lovely holiday snap... forgetting that two of the people in the picture are dead (and that he killed one of them) or that another one of them pointed a gun at his head. but dont worry, cos it was a life affirming event and richard has 'developed' and 'grown'. well, thats all right then. (mattwakeman from cardiff uni, 29 May 2001)

The question of whether Richard has undergone significant changes (as many viewers expect he would or should) becomes a major, recurrent topic, which is more often than not found wanting. For one reviewer, 'the characters remain unchanged by events at the end therefore there is zero character development.' (Theo Robertson from Isle Of Bute, Scotland, 10 December 2007). Another viewer notes that, in the end, there is no change at all, only nostalgia: 'The movies [sic] ending is nothing but Richard being nostalgic about his beach adventures in his normal-life setting, not having learned any lesson or gained any emotional strength' (carloshache from Sweden, 15 April 2006). Some viewers take issue with the fact that Richard's 'education' is not made through hardship, dismissing him and the beach community as 'pathetic, craven softies from civilization' (Roland E. Zwick (magneteach@aol.com) from United States, 30 September 2000); others put Richard's inability to undergo change down to a lack of events.

Again, this contrasts with Garland's book, consistently praised for its exciting eventfulness and dramatic tension, which manages to grab the readers' attention. According to a fan of Garland's, 'Every time I stopped reading, I couldn't think of anything but what was going to happen next' (bmac8903 from United States, 31 August 2006). Conversely, many reviewers deplore the fact that *nothing (special) really happens* in the film (cf. Terrell Howell (KnightsofNi11) from United States, 28 November 2011), an observation that joins together travel *and narrative* expectations. On the whole, viewers take it for granted that *The Beach* is (or should be) about telling a 'good story', largely understood in terms of dramatic tension, a cause-effect chain of events responsible for the advancement of the story, and significant character development. The latter is to be assessed at the end and is inevitably linked to the way characters in general, and the protagonist in particular, respond or somehow contribute to what is going on. Critics of the film therefore focus on its poor script and underdeveloped characters, equating the movie with a story and the story with a

conflict, and stressing that events should 'propel the story forward' rather than just be 'placed side by side', as this disillusioned reviewer puts it:

> (…) conflict is the basis of all drama. If there is no problem for the main character to solve or something for him or her to achieve, there is no purpose for the character's state of being. Without character we can have no story. Without story we can have no movie. The new sexy, glamorous novel adaptation from "Trainspotting" director Danny Boyle, runs into that rare, insidious flaw: other than some irrelevant singular character tensions, there isn't much conflict in its plot. The film primarily consists of a slew of related events placed side by side. Thus, many of the scenes do not propel the story forward. The conclusion doesn't even know where to commence because there is nothing to explicate. (Blake French (dlfspartan@aol.com) from USA, 10 March 2000)

What is at stake here, as one bemused, disillusioned viewer verbalises (in a review significantly entitled 'I don't get it…'), is the film's failure to conform to the classical narrative film structure:

> Maybe I'm just too used to the idea that films have to begin at a certain point, build to at least SOMETHING of a climax, and then subside into an appropriate denouement. And maybe I missed all of that in this film. (Elicia-2, 23 September 2001)

Interestingly, the reaction of an enthusiastic reviewer suggests that this kind of expectation can give way to another one, which values images over plot, contemplation over action:

> Often movies are about one character among a problem, and resolving it. Often they make a travel to solve the problem, story develops all surrounding the problem or obstacle. 'The Beach' has the quality of not being of a story, but more like a quest. (…) This film is not conventional. It's about a form of discovery, when in the beach, a calm beach; we stay in contact with Nature and rediscover our most basic needs and desires. (l_JohnOwens_l from Boston, 17 January 2008)

For this viewer, then, the film may lack a classic plot; however, its avoidance of a problem-solving narrative approach, far from a weakness, is in keeping with the film's 'message', earning *The Beach* the epithet of 'an unorthodox masterpiece'. This viewer's idea of film as a 'quest' is closer to the open-ended, digressive type of travel film that was common in early cinema, being part of a 'cinema of attraction' (Gunning, 1986) that was more interested in *showing* rather than telling, in stringing images together for their visual and emotional effect rather than for their contribution to a fictional diegesis. Early travel films or travelogues, with their essayistic, episodic and open-ended form, had more to do with fairground attractions than literary or theatre traditions, experiencing a certain decline when narrative became the norm (Gunning, 2006, p. 178).

However, for viewers who share an interest in the story, it is clear that such elements of the classical narrative film as dramatic conflict, cause-effect event unfolding and character development played a crucial role in the way they assessed the film's central claim that the travelling protagonist undergoes personal transformation. In general, what viewers deplore is the gap between the film's overt alignment with the classic 'journey-as-transformation' narrative – promised in the official trailer, which states: 'somewhere on this planet it must exist a place, an experience, an encounter that changes everything'[3] – and the final result. In this case, travel and narrative expectations cannot be dissociated, and if the purpose of the journey (i.e. transformation) is deemed a (narrative) failure, then it is easy to conclude that the traveller might as well have stayed

at home, where 'events' only happen vicariously, through electronic media, as one disappointed viewer suggests:

> The film would have us believe his [Richard's] experiences are an exercise in self discovery. However, the thin and disjointed plot doesn't manage to conjure up anything sufficiently profound and we're left with a string of fabrications and a feeling that our hero would have been better off staying home and playing video games. (George Parker from Orange County, CA USA, 28 July 2000).

## 'I'm no Communist. Just a lover of good movies': Travel and change in *The Motorcycle Diaries*

The association between travel and transformation is brought out with greater clarity in Walter Salles' Oscar-winning movie, *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), which invites us to understand Ernesto Guevara de la Serna (played by Gael García Bernal), future *guerrillero* and communist statesman, through the journey he took across South America as a young medical student, in the company of his biochemist friend Alberto Granado (Rodrigo De la Serna). The filmmakers' efforts to keep the film 'apolitical' – which most reviewers recognised and appreciated – did not prevent it from being caught up in political polemic, especially in the United States, where right-wing critics dismissed it as the liberal 'whitewashing' of a murderous terrorist (e.g. rsol55 from Los Angeles, CA USA, 27 September 2004; from United States, 6 April 2006). Viewers of other political persuasions also condemned the film for its blind 'romanticism' or for being 'a political hagiography of how a young man became a socialist saint' (limau from United Kingdom, 26 December 2007). Finally, self-declared Che supporters lamented what they considered to be a moderate, sanitised version of Che (adjectives like 'tame' and 'tepid' are frequent), one that excludes Ernesto's previous interest in politics and fails to hint at the way these politics were later to be more radically developed and pursued.

In any case, the film's travel content was what attracted most viewers. An American reviewer described it as 'a wonderful road movie, a true journey in all senses of the word', concluding, '[t]his is one of the best films I've seen in ages. And I'm no Communist. Just a lover of good movies' (mezaco from usa, 21 January 2005). Indeed, *The Motorcycle Diaries* relies on a journey-based narrative structure to a greater extent than *The Beach*. Recounted in voice-over narration by the young protagonist, [4] the eight-month, 8,000 km long journey is presented as a turning-point in Ernesto's life and a crucial part of the political education that would eventually turn him into 'Che.' In effect, it is only after travelling from his home, in Argentina, to Chile, Peru and Venezuela, where the journey and the film end, that the young Ernesto reaches a vision of a united and liberated Latin America, in a speech that emerges as the pinnacle of his political education. Ernesto is thus the young idealist or 'dreamer', ready to be transformed through his first-hand contact with the people and landscapes of Latin America (cf. Williams, 2007, p. 20). This transformation is confirmed at the end of the film, when the protagonist pensively declares, 'I'm not the person I once was.'

The motif of self-discovery and self-transformation is intrinsic to the film: as Claire Williams has pointed out, 'the road movie provides the perfect structure for stories of self-discovery' (2007, p. 11). Film critic Dimitris Eleftheriotis has similarly described *The Motorcycle Diaries* as an example of a 'journey of exploration, discovery

and revelation' of the world, the land and the self, where travelled space and self-transformation interact (2010, p. 99). Most IMDB reviewers recognise and adhere to this frame, understanding the good and bad moments that make up Ernesto's trip – but especially the hardships he endured (lack of provisions, bad weather, asthma) and his encounters with dispossessed and oppressed people (Chilean miners, Peruvian farmers and the interned patients of a leper colony) – as part of a long process of self-knowledge and self-education that is conducive to a final epiphany. Given its 'real-life' content, viewers hesitate as to whether they should approach the film as a biopic or as 'a road movie in it's [sic] own right' (TheNorthernMonkee from Manchester, 7 September 2004). The latter seems ultimately to prevail, along with other genres like the 'buddy picture', the memoir, the travelogue and the coming-of-age story (cf. revere-7 from the heartland, 10 September 2009).

Depicted as a 'regular' guy and 'a guy like us', the figure of Che becomes more likeable and approachable, thus reflecting, in the opinion of some critics, the director's desire to both pander to a wider audience and tap into the popularity of the 'Che brand' (e.g. beckerkorn from St. Paul, MN, 21 October 2004; briangonzales from United States, 6 October 2004). According to one reviewer, if you set aside the 'Great Man's Origin's story', you are left with 'a beautiful, beautiful tale well told of two friends sharing an extraordinary experience' (kpbtm from Oxford, England, 3 September 2004), a possibility that turns out to be even more inspiring. Commending the fact that Gael Garcia Bernal plays Ernesto 'as a kid on his first real adventure away from home, much like any pre-college teen in the UK on his GAP year', this same reviewer concludes:

> It being about a week now since I saw the film, it has had a chance to settle. The strongest feeling I have for the film now is wonderment. I want to read Che's diaries, I want to go back to South America, I want to meet all these extraordinary people. But above all I want to see the film again, see a young man to whom I can relate, not a revolutionary giant whose name perhaps holds more significance now than his deeds, whose face is emblazoned on more posters and t-shirts than James Dean. Fuser [Ernesto's nickname] is just a kid like any other. In this film we come to understand how he became Che Guevara, a man unlike any other. (kpbtm from Oxford, England, 3 September 2004)

Some Latin American viewers (a major group among reviewers) resented the idea that Ernesto could be *just* a backpacker; as a reviewer from Argentina put it, 'there's a lot more to Che than your average middle class backpacker slumming it. And there's a lot more to Latin America than pretty Inca ruins' (rooroo-1 from Buenos Aires, Argentina, 19 August 2004). For most reviewers, however, as the above quote demonstrates, the fact that the protagonist could be viewed as a 'kid like any other' did not prevent him from being looked up to as 'a man unlike any other'. Ernesto is also the man he is about to become, a paradox that the travelling as transformation motif places at the core of the film.

In keeping with one of the film's taglines, 'Let the world change you... and you can change the world,' which echoes throughout several reviews (e.g. gauad from San Diego, CA, 8 December 2004), the connection between travelling and transformation is largely taken for granted. Reviewers praise the film's 'sense of authenticity', associating it with on-location filming, Latin American slang (especially swearing) and the use of non-professional actors (e.g. rogerdarlington from United Kingdom, 5 September 2004), and discuss the exact moment when Ernesto's transformation took place (e.g. gentendo from United States, 30 November 2008). Moreover, terms like 'education', 'formation', 'development,' 'growth', 'progression', 'evolution', 'enlightenment' and even

'metamorphosis' are recurrent, especially in reviews that stress the road movie, travelogue side of the film, rather than its biopic content. As in *The Beach*, Ernesto's rite of passage also involves a water-crossing scene: just as Richard had plunged into the waterfall to enter the secluded beach, Ernesto swims across the dark waters of the Amazon river to join the leper outcasts on the other side. Much commented on the IMDB site (where it is also criticised for being unrealistic, irrelevant and too Hollywood-like), this scene is perceived by many as the film's emotional climax. In one viewer's words, 'The most powerful emotional connection you have is probably when Ernesto, weakened by frequent asthma attacks, struggles to swim across the Amazon to spend his 24th birthday with patients at the San Pablo leper colony' (lesly1217 from United States, 30 November 2011), and another reviewer describes the scene as the 'self-baptism' of 'a Christ resurrected' (intrinsicchaos from San Diego, CA, 16 December 2004).

Not all viewers, however, were satisfied on this count. Disappointed reviewers stressed the film's failure to realistically evoke the travel-as-transformation motif and voiced doubts regarding Ernesto's 'transformation'. After recognising the film's major premise, 'let the world change you', one viewer laments the fact that s/he could not tell the difference between 'before the journey and after the journey', adding:

> If there was one particular epiphany along the journey, then I admit that I missed it. (…) Also, the change in Guevara may have been a little too subtle for it to be effective in my mind. I didn't see the connection between the journey and a change as a result. He did what he felt was the right thing over the course of the entire journey - it wasn't developed on the road. (dc_follies from United States, 14 November 2005)

According to one reviewer, Ernesto already possessed a social conscience when he set out on his journey, which, he adds parenthetically, '[makes] the whole premise of the film futile' (helsbells02 from Wiltshire, England, 26 August 2004). After doing some biographical research, another viewer also concludes, '[t]he trip around South America made (partly) by motorcycle was not so much an awakening as a confirmation. I'm quite sure others have made similar journeys without deciding upon the life of a revolutionary' (Philby-3 from Sydney, Australia, 7 October 2004). Considering the film more of a biopic than a road movie, another reviewer finds it 'surprising how undramatic what happens that turns a sweet, middle-class med student into a revolutionary', pointing out that 'there's no eye-opening "Grapes of Wrath" conflict' (noralee from Queens, NY, 15 October 2004). A bored viewer exclaims: 'So what if he ended up being Che Guerva [sic], I did not see how these little dumb things made him a revolutionary' (TheEmulator23 (Shelman23@gmail.com) from S. Lake Tahoe, CA, 2 March 2005).

Other reviewers noted the film's 'lightness', which contradicted the sense of gravitas that the much-trumpeted transformation theme was supposed to entail. Hence a reviewer's remark that 'nothing seems very substantial. Even the leper colony that so fundamentally changes Ernesto is portrayed as little more than a summer camp' (evanston_dad from United States, 6 September 2005). For another viewer, though entertaining, the film was 'just too cliché to seem really important'. Regretting that 'safe storytelling' was favoured, this viewer adds, '[u]nfortunately, nothing really groundbreaking or important happens' (Hawley_Griffin (grouchymarx@hotmail.com) from Buenos Aires, 16 August 2004). Other reviewers share this opinion, lamenting the fact that either very little happens in this journey or, when things do happen, they are

not enough to change someone as much as we are made to believe they changed Ernesto. A disappointed reviewer put it bluntly, '[t]he only thing that seems to change from Buenos Aires to Caracas are a few ideas and the landscape' (kinaidos from Seattle, WA, 2 October 2004).

As in *The Beach*, this failure is generally put down to a bad script and poor direction. Viewers complain that characters are flat, one-dimensional and lacking an internal conflict. For a Lawrence of Arabia fan, there is no 'internal struggle' in Ernesto between his 'new beliefs' and his 'old way of life', which amounts to 'a watered-down Jesus-figure' (BodyDoubleFilms from London, England, 1 October 2004). For another reviewer, '[characters] don't develop. They realize things, but they don't appear to change' (kinaidos from Seattle, WA, 2 October 2004). As with *The Beach*, expectations of what a film should be, namely regarding its narrative structure, crucially shape the viewers' reactions: 'The simplest criticism I can make of *The Motorcycle Diaries* is that it has no climax. Everything seems to be adding up to something, but the audience is never really taken for the ride' (heystella51 from Chicago, 1 November 2004). For a French viewer, the director seems to 'shoot randomly', 'as if there is no script', concluding, '[t]his is not really a movie' (jb2319 from France, 21 September 2006).

Finally, the fact that the protagonist *is* a well-known historical figure (despite the filmmakers' intention to concentrate on the pre-iconic Che, so as to avoid an overly political film) also led to some disappointment. On the one hand, the travelogue suggests that Ernesto underwent some important change; on the other hand, the biographical evidence mobilised by the film fails to convince that such change ever took place, or in that way, or that it was ever as important as we are led to believe. Viewers' turn to Che's extra-fictional life for answers, especially the 'actual diaries' (Jiminy_critic from United Kingdom, 6 January 2005), invoking, as with *The Beach*, problems of adaptation from literary to filmic form. As one sympathetic reviewer puts it:

> In overall the movie tried to show how this trip across the whole continent changed "Che" and his friend but I think that in that point it failed miserably. I really didn't see any point in all those random people that the movie showed from different countries in the Spanish side of South America. But my biggest problem is that "Che" himself wrote the diaries so I can't say "No way, that couldn't effect [sic] him". And since I didn't read the book saying that the movie didn't show the book very well will be only a guess. So either the "Che" writes badly or the movie is not very well done. (Vitaly Entin (masyauefa) from Israel, 6 March 2005)

These critiques notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the 'majestic' scenery (which includes Machu Picchu, one of the world's most visited sites) was the film's major point of attraction, prompting viewers to report a desire to make a similar trip or visit the same places in South America. A reviewer born in Argentina, who (atypically) has not seen the film, expects *The Motorcycle Diaries* to address the concept of road trip 'ingrained in all Argentine youths', which consists in retracing the route that San Martín travelled in his nineteenth-century campaign to liberate South America from Spanish rule (atabora from United States, 2 October 2004). Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that the attractive sights and the engrossing story (unlike *The Beach*, *The Motorcycle Diaries* inspired overall empathy with the main characters) made many reviewers compare watching the film to 'real' travelling or a 'vicarious thrill' (revere-7 from the heartland, 10 September 2009), eliciting phrases like: 'I felt like I traveled across South America through this movie' (pranabksharma from India, 16 May 2013) or

'I felt transported to each scene' (zabokrugby8 from United States, 15 September 2013).[5]

Apart from this urge to travel, the film also triggered in some viewers reminiscences of previous travels (though not as frequently, it should be noted, as in *The Beach* reviews). Others reported that the film left a strong impression on them, as in the case of a young reviewer who describes the experience of watching the film as a soul-searching journey. By making a parallel between film, journey and life, and by expressing a yearning for a 'life-changing' experience of his own, this viewer thus confirms how powerful and inspiring narratives of travel-as-transformation can be:

> While watching this film, I felt the journey of my own life displayed in my mind—as if running parallel to the journey I was watching. It was somewhat cathartic to recall where I've come from and where I'm currently heading. My life wasn't always invested with the pursuit of knowledge, inquiry or academia, but was filled with trivial pursuits such as parties, techno clubs, materialisms and other mind-numbing activities. Just as the values of the characters shifted from that which was good to that which was greater, I felt that I have been traveling a similar path the more I experience life. That which separates these characters from me, which is to say, that which separates the wise from the naïve, is experience. I still feel pretty selfish; my hope is that I'll have some life-changing experience like Che did and learn to foster my selfish side towards more selfless pursuits. (gentendo from United States, 30 November 2008)

## Conclusion: Theorising change in travel (and through film)

Research on the links between film and tourism and on film-induced tourism in particular, has shown that stories, and not just attractive sceneries, are crucial in drawing viewers to places formerly viewed in the media. Storytelling offers many opportunities for the viewer's immersion, be it by way of the story's themes and myths, character identification, or narrative tension and the desire to know what is going to happen next. This last feature is particularly important, since our notion of a film presupposes that some kind of action or event will necessarily take place, often justifying the time and money spent in watching a film. Films are by definition the 'place' where things happen, as the protagonist of *The Beach* notes when he first gets hold of the map to the secret beach:

> You hope… and you dream. But you never believe that something's gonna happen for you, not like it does in the movies. And when it actually does, you want it to feel different, more visceral, more real. I waited for it to hit me [he looks at the map], but it just wouldn't happen.

For Richard, a movie is, of course, synonymous with narrative film, especially in the guise of the Hollywood entertainment movie, in its 'classical' variant, which has become so popular and pervasive. This is, undoubtedly, most people's general idea of what a film is or should be (Bordwell, 1985a). Narrative has become such a natural way of making sense of films that we forget that it is the outcome of a historical process that took place roughly between 1915 and 1955, when film established itself as 'a self-sufficient, universally intelligible unit of about two hours length' (Ellis, 1992, p. 1), which could be viewed as a one-time event in a public theatre for the price of a ticket. During this period, film also became a 'self-enclosed narrational form' (Ellis, 1992, p. 25), its main purpose being to tell a story. Run by a narrative logic, which seeks to subordinate all filmic elements (images, dialogues, mise-en-scène, sound, lighting, etc.)

to storytelling, the classical narrative film generally unfolds in response to a central problem or crisis introduced early in the film. The solution to this crisis, delivered with the film's ending, emerges as the logical outcome of a cause-effect chain of events that converge around the main character, on whom the action hinges and from whose unifying point of view the story is often told. As a specialist of the classical narrative film has pointed out, 'Hollywood characters, especially protagonists, are goal-oriented. The hero desires something new to his/her situation, or the hero seeks to restore an original state of affairs' (Bordwell, 1985b, p. 16).

The idea of travel as a life-changing experience is all too often associated with the rhetoric that emanates from the tourism industry. Warwick Frost (2010) encountered it at the centre of tourism-inducing films about the Australian Outback. In a famous article, Edward Bruner (1991) dismissed it as a hyperbolic construction of tourist brochures, ads and travelogues, according to which tourists undergo dramatic changes during their journey, while native hosts remain essentially unchanged (1991, p. 240). This author ultimately suggests that the opposite is, in fact, the case: 'the tourist self is modified very little [by the tour] while the native self experiences profound change' (1991, p. 248). More recently, Orvar Löfgren (2008) has also associated the rhetoric of the spectacular and the eventful with the 'experience economy', stressing the need to shift tourism research to more banal and less exciting experiences.

None of this invalidates the fact that, as my research demonstrates, narratives of travel-as-transformation have a strong appeal for film viewers, suggesting that change is still an important part of the travel experience. The idea of travel as a life-changing experience is central to both *The Beach* and *The Motorcycle Diaries*. Viewers of these films are not only aware of these films' embedded promise of 'change', but are also determined to confirm whether such change has actually taken place, that is, whether these films do or do not live up to their promise. The travel-as-transformation trope thus becomes a major litmus test for these films' accomplishments and ultimate success.

It should be noted that both films are deeply embedded in a youth backpacking culture, in which narratives of self-change are an intrinsic part of the travel experience, as Chaim Noy's (2004) work on Israeli backpackers has established. In both *The Beach* and *The Motorcycle Diaries* the protagonists are backpackers who tell the story of their journey in voice-over narration. Furthermore, the theme of change is located towards the end of the film, just as the theme of self-change is structurally placed at the end of the narratives told by Israeli backpackers, in the guise of a natural conclusion (Noy, 2004, p. 83). Noy also established that backpackers often tried to avoid the 'normative collective expectation that participation in the trip [would] generate a "real change"' (2004, p. 89), often treating it as an undesirable cliché. Though most reviewers do not call into question the 'normative expectation' (overtly stated in these films' trailers) that travel is to be a catalyst for change, they do discuss whether the film meets such an expectation. A common exercise is to try and expose the discrepancy between the film's ideology (its 'promise') and the final result – a discrepancy that social scientists have found to be 'endemic' to backpacking and tourism in general (Cohen, 2003, p. 99).

Both *The Beach* and *The Motorcycle Diaries* are judged for their 'realism', often assessed in relation to film conventions as well as the viewers' own knowledge and experience of similar places and situations. Most importantly, however, expectations about the journey as a source of transformation coalesce with narrative expectations.

With the exception of a few viewers, who found enough pleasure in the more visual and even picturesque side of the films, valuing a looser and open-ended filmic form that is more evocative of the early travelogue than of the classical narrative film (cf. Ruoff, 2006, p. 11; Sampaio, 2012b), most critics of *The Beach* and *The Motorcycle Diaries* ascribe their disappointment to the script and the plot. For many of them, problems like poor character development, lack of conflict and dramatic tension, disconnected (or lack of) events and an anti-climactic ending fail to convey a sense of character self-discovery and change. In *The Beach*, the film compares poorly in relation to the book. In fact, while Garland's novel is often described as 'life-changing', the film is only seldom so. In the tourist media space, book reading and film viewing seem to occupy different hierarchal positions. While the former is more easily incorporated into the travelling experience (some reviewers mention taking Garland's book in their journeys, and Ernesto is regularly seen reading in *The Motorcycle Diaries*), watching a film and playing video games (which we see Richard do in *The Beach*) are usually associated with the characters' inaction or even passivity. Significantly, at the beginning of *The Beach*, Richard refers to having watched 'three dumb movies' during his 18-hour flight to Bangkok, and pours contempt on a group of tourists who are watching a film in the hotel lobby.

In *The Motorcycle Diaries*, the pleasures derived from the 'movements of exploration, discovery and revelation' (Eleftheriotis, 2010), as applied to Latin American landscapes and people, are singled out as an important part of the cinematic experience. Viewers draw on the expectations created by the travelogue and (implicitly) the classical narrative structure, which promise or hint at a story of self-transformation, to express their appreciation or register their disappointment. If several viewers feel let down by the biopic (especially what they consider to be the film's biographical inaccuracies), most feel encouraged to learn more about Che. The fact that the film is based on the 'real-life' journals of a real-life person (and the later testimony of a travel companion) appears to make viewers more tolerant of narrative inconsistencies and realism-derived problems. These aspects continue to be invoked to criticise the discrepancy between the film's promise concerning the protagonist's transformation and its outcome; however, they do not seem strong enough to prevent some viewers from describing the film as a 'life-changing experience' of its own, in a gesture that aligns film watching and fictional travelling with their personal lives, which apparently surpasses the limits of the travel-as-transformation rhetoric.

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## Notes

[1] The present research on tourism-related films comes in the wake of my earlier study of tourism in E.M. Forster's Italian novels (Sampaio, 2012a), where I drew heavily on Alain Badiou's concept of 'event'. Though I have moved away from this philosophical framework, as my attention has shifted to other issues, and though my use of the term 'event' is now confined to a narrative sense, I nevertheless acknowledge the influence of Badiou's concept, which may have coloured some of my arguments and conclusions.

[2] Though there are many variations, these films are usually about an inexperienced or sexually inhibited heroine (usually American or British) who feels challenged in a tourist situation. Classic examples include David Lean's *Summertime* (1955) and *A Passage to India* (1984), and Merchant and Ivory's *A Room with a View* (1985). Modern up-dates have featured independent, but still personally unfulfilled, professional women who find love abroad – as in Peter Faiman's *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and, in a more playful, self-ironical manner, Woody Allen's *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008). Another popular version features couples who are having problems in their marriage and turn to travel in the hope of a solution, as in Rosselini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1954) and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006). Finally, the sexually-inhibited heroine finds a variation in the erotic genre, as illustrated in the 1970s *Emanuelle* trilogy, where the protagonist (played by Dutch actress Sylvia Kristel), unlike her more timid counterparts, takes every opportunity to expand her erotic self as she travels to exotic places like Thailand (*Emmanuelle*, 1974), Hong Kong and Bali (*Emanuelle l'antivierge*, 1975), or the Seychelles (*Goodbye Emanuelle*, 1977). In all these films (and the list is far from complete), tourism is in some way associated with a 'life-changing experience'.

[3] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwbLivFNZok

[4] The film was also based on written sources: Che Guevara's journals (1952) and Alberto Granado's memoirs of the same voyage (1978).

[5] As with *The Beach*, tourism agencies sought to take advantage of the promotional opportunities opened up by *The Motorcycle Diaries*. Following the film release, some tour operators started to offer Che Guevara-themed trips and, in 2010, Argentinean, Bolivean and Cuban tourism offices announced they were preparing an international tourist route entitled 'Caminos de Che' ('Che's Paths'). See Williams (2007, p. 23). This aspect is mentioned in a recent review: 'I wasn't at all surprised to learn that after the film travel firms started running tours of the route Che took; the scenery is varied, stunning and beautifully shot' (Tweekums from United Kingdom, 4 September 2012).

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