Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Before Night Falls by Jon Kilik; Julian Schnabel; Cunningham O'Keefe; Lazaro Gomez Carriles; Julian Schnabel

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than it does to documented facts. *Thirteen Days* uses the Cuban missile crisis to argue that military men, like nuclear weapons, are inherently dangerous commodities that require vigilant handling.

Other elements of the "take-home" message, however, can be readily documented in the sources. One of the most telling details, taken from Robert Kennedy's memoir, is the president's discussion of *The Guns of August* (1962), Barbara Tuchman's account of the outbreak of World War I, which he had recently read. President Kennedy cites Tuchman's narrative as evidence that miscalculations and pride can allow great states to slip into war. He resolves to avoid the same pitfalls in 1962. That a work of history should be cited at so crucial a juncture is a rare validation of popular historical writing. With his well-publicized screenings of *Thirteen Days* to Fidel Castro and senior political figures in Russia, Costner clearly hopes that this film may serve a similar purpose in an audiovisual age. It is a worthy ambition.

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BEFORE NIGHT FALLS. Produced by Jon Kilik; directed by Julian Schnabel; screenplay by Cunningham O'Keefe, Lázaro Gómez Carriles, and Julian Schnabel. 2000; color; 133 minutes. Distributed by Fine Line Features.

Reinaldo Arenas (1943–1990) grew up poor in the eastern Cuban province of Holguín, and he supported Fidel Castro and the guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra mountains against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952–1959). After the triumph of the revolution, Arenas moved to Havana, where he eventually dedicated himself to writing. Initially, Arenas and other writers and intellectuals shared an optimism about the revolution. The banning in 1961 of Sabá Cabrera Infante's film *P.M.*, about Cuban nightlife, signaled a souring of the relationship between intellectuals and the regime.

In the 1960s, the Cuban government centralized cultural production with the creation of the Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC), which urged writers to produce works that would support the revolution. In 1965, the Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (UMAP) were established to rehabilitate anyone whom the regime considered antisocial, and homosexuals became one of the primary targets. By the time of the First National Congress on Education and Culture in 1971, the regime extolled the primacy of political commitment over freedom of expression and also adopted a number of homophobic measures.

In the midst of these changes, Arenas was beginning to bloom as a writer. He had published his first novel, *Celestino antes del alba* (*Singing from the Well* [1967]) and had come into contact with many of the great writers of modern Cuba, including José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera. But soon afterwards, he would begin to have serious problems with Cuban censorship and the military revolutionary ideals. Arenas responded by smuggling his work abroad to be published. The homophobia of the revolution stifled him, but he responded with unbridled sexual activity with men, using, as he later affirmed, "sex as a weapon." Cuban authorities eventually jailed Arenas for molestation of minors and for publishing outside of Cuba; he was released when he signaled that he had reformed his ways. Arenas eventually left the island for the United States in the Mariel boatlifts of 1980. He moved briefly to Miami before settling in New York, where he continued to write until his death due to AIDS (although it was ruled a suicide) in 1990.

Inspired by Arenas's tragic yet exuberant life, director Julian Schnabel has created an ambitious homage to this singular Cuban writer. Employing a historical narrative style, *Before Night Falls* makes use of Arenas's poetry, stunning visual imagery, historical footage, and superbly placed music to shape a cinematographic collage that, although at times unclear, is nevertheless powerful. The film relies on many of Arenas's writings, including his memoir (1993) from which the film takes its title. It depicts many human rights violations in Cuba, but Schnabel is not merely interested in the facts. He has modified some of the historical material and made economic use of Arenas's stories to portray a greater truth: the redeeming nature of art, a theme also developed in his previous film *Basquiat* (1996). This rich production has two shortcomings, however: it does not provide a critical analysis of Arenas's inner world, nor does it give us a broad understanding of the inner struggles of the Cuban revolution.

The creative process and motivation of any artist is difficult to expose, and many films have attempted this with varying success. Recent attempts include the tortured portrayal of Francis Bacon in *Love is the Devil* (1998); Ed Harris's *Pollack* (2000), and Philip Kaufman's *Quills* (2000); the last is dedicated to the Marquis de Sade, with whom many may draw parallels with Arenas. Understanding Rainer Maria Rilke's advice to the young poet, Schnabel intelligently gives us a sense of Arenas's childhood, yet we see little of how his early experience informed his worldview or affected his inner life. The film ends with a Spanish and English version of the poem "Yo soy" that emphasizes Arenas's belief that he would always be "that child 'of always,'" but the significance of these words is not particularly developed throughout the film.

Arenas wrote about history, repression, and dehumanization in the baroque style of the Cuban literary tradition, but he also wrote about sex and how sexuality in Cuba shaped his life. Indeed, he viewed both sex and art as vehicles of redemption. Schnabel deals candidly with Arenas's homosexuality and includes an important scene in which Arenas declares that sex became a way of fighting repression, "a weapon to use against the regime." Yet in the film Arenas's voracious sexual appetite and prolific sexual activity from the

time he was a child in the countryside until his death becomes secondary to his artistic nature.

The second criticism relates to historical representation. Viewers receive very little information about the struggles of the revolution and its attempts, however ill-informed and paranoiac, to create a socialist anti-imperialist society. The 1960s and 1970s were decades of consolidation under the mantra "Within the Revolution EVERYTHING. Outside the revolution NOTHING." Cuba had survived the Bay of Pigs attack in 1961, threatened the balance of power during the missile crisis of 1962, and became a leader in Third World anticolonial struggles. Castro's regime attempted to rid itself of capitalist bourgeois values but suffered from the brain drain and disillusion so aptly portrayed in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968). Cuba promoted universal health care and education while often responding to internal challenges with Stalinist tactics and purges. But the government's view of homosexuality was not as uniform as its view of dissidence. Overt homosexuality was often misunderstood as capitalist decadence, a type of antisocial behavior or "improper conduct," views superbly exposed in Nelson Almendros and Orlando Jiménes Leal's film *Improper Conduct* (1984). Even so, this policy was selective, and many homosexuals served the revolution, as Gutiérrez Alea's film *Fresa y Chocolate* (1994) attests.

Schnabel does succeed in showing the contradiction that is/was Cuba, or, in Arenas's words, "the voices of poetry versus the drums of militarism." He emphasizes the power of art with words from Cuban literary personalities, such as Lézama Lima and Piñera, who appear briefly in the film. The importance of these two literary giants is not sufficiently underscored, however, nor do we witness how the regime marginalized them. Moreover, many important characters enter and leave the story with little explanation (including Jorge and Margarita Camacho, who helped Arenas smuggle his work out of the country). Yet the revolution included many talented intellectuals and writers, including Miguel Barnet, Eliseo Diego, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, and Nicolás Guillén, and it received support from many others abroad. Cuba became a pioneer in Latin American film, with directors such as Gutiérrez Alea and Julio García Espinosa, and eventually created one of the major Latin American film festivals in 1979. Musical pioneers such as Silvio Rodríquez and Pablo Milanés, who did not necessarily toe the party line, played important roles in Cuban cultural life.

Arenas's sense of urgency and fear was not unfounded, however, and apologists must recognize the problematic legacy of the revolution. The Mariel crisis which lead to the boatlifts took the regime by surprise, and in the end many former supporters desperately wanted to leave Cuba. 125,000 left in 1980 alone. The sense of freedom that Arenas felt in the United States is aptly portrayed by the scene of him and his devoted friend Lázaro staring up to the skies as snow falls upon them. But Arenas's experience in the United States was not purely idyllic. He resented the consumerism of Miami and had many criticisms of U.S. views on sex and sexuality, for example.

Schnabel's treatment of Arenas's life in New York is not as visually or emotionally compelling as the early parts in Cuba. In the film, Arenas lives a subdued life until his eventual death in 1990. In fact, Arenas experienced the wonders and dangers of New York for almost a decade, and he wrote about many of them.

Some viewers may be annoyed by the use of accented English with Spanish in the background to bring forth a foreign flavor, although somehow this technique recreates the atmosphere of Cuba for an English-speaking audience. Representations of Afro-Cubans are also at times problematic, particularly the superficial presentation of the Afro-Cuban religious ceremony (Santería) more than half way through the film. Schnabel symbolizes Cuban repression with a police raid of a Santería "performance," musically dramatized by Gustav Mahler's somber *Adagietto* (Symphony No. 5) drowning out the rhythm of the drums. At this moment, Arenas's and Schnabel's worlds unite in a theme that resonates throughout the film: repression is the enemy of art. The film nonetheless affirms that even in the direst of situation, Arenas the artist was able to hold on to something that allowed him to celebrate life, at least until he decided that life was no longer worth living.

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IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE. Produced, written, and directed by Kar-wai Wong. 2000; color; 98 minutes. Distributed by USA Films.

According to recent entertainment industry news, the successes of *Gladiator* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* have spurred further interest in historical drama. Not only has Touchstone Pictures been heavily promoting *Pearl Harbor* for months, but a number of film projects treating historical events and personages are scheduled to begin production. These include, for example, plans for epic films about Hannibal's crossing of the Alps during the Second Punic War and the destruction of the Japanese samurai class in the nineteenth century, as well as the continued mining of the World War II vein opened up by *Saving Private Ryan*.

Although the actual and anticipated popularity of such films, at first glance, would seem to evince a general and widespread interest in history, the specifics of subject matter, narrative architecture, and visual articulation reveal how narrowly Hollywood, if not the general public, conceptualize that term. Not only does history seem to take place in a handful of locations—sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, is clearly positioned off the map—but Hollywood's version of it remains, for the most part, a linear narrative focused on the actions of singular individuals. Kar-wai Wong's *In the Mood for Love* does not at all fit into this framework of expectations that has come to typify historical drama.