THIRTEEN DAYS

Roger Donaldson, USA, 2000

Duck and cover, that self-protective drill that we children of the plenitude dutifully replayed in the grammar schools of the plains, is the fey, absurd Fifties side of those days leading up to the impossibly modern Sixties, worn almost like a badge of cool, of having been there, done that. So we gaze at Peter Kuran's opening titles sequence, the only beautiful thing about *Thirteen Days*, the best and the brightest in the otherwise disappointing Hollywood career of New Zealand-by-way-of-Australia director Roger Donaldson (*Dante's Peak*, *Species*, *The Getaway*).

A cliché now, the title's images are a still-gorgeous extravaganza of sulfurous missile plumes and psychotropic mushroom clouds that owes all to the death aesthetics first promulgated in Michael Herr's account of incoming artillery in his groundbreaking memoir *Dispatches*, as if Alice fell not through the looking glass but into the lava lamp. See, the titles shimmer, this is what the world would have faced had the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 gone the other way, the bombs bursting in air – ooh, aah – a cavalcade of brilliant death star explosions that would've pre-cancelled tonight's screening.

The film, of course, was willed into being by Kevin Costner, who co-produced it (as he did Oliver Stone's *JFK*), but it transcends its star-vehicle genesis as one more in the kaleidoscope of Costner's faux, world-weary characters who mug their way to the box office. It's less a character study than a very good articulation of values at a timely moment. How close we came to beautiful extinction is the engine that drives the piece, which uses two-dimensional characters in the service of a one-dimensional point: thank God for good men in the right place at the wrong time, the film fairly breathes through the air ducts. I'm a sucker for films of this ilk, where characters are fixed, immutable, and therefore not subject to examination, dandies in the aspic of a political point. I read into the subtext what I want to see: imagine the electorally defrauded Nixon at the helm instead of JFK, and we would have all been toast; imagine W in the same circumstances today, and it's mega-dittos, good buddy. Ya don't wanna pull a guy away from video golf, after all, before he gets to the 19th hole on his twelfth station to whatever.

Thank God indeed for JFK and Bobby, whose long shadows at film's end the camera adores. Thank God for trusty Special Aide to the President and pigskin pal Kenny O'Donnell, the part Costner gave himself – Boston accent be damned – as the film's everyman epicenter, shaken from his bed to be apprised of the U-2 reconnaissance flight that turned up Castro's Erector set of SS-4 medium-range missiles capable of obliterating Washington faster than today's menace, Trent Lott's hairspray.

The $80 million *Thirteen Days* wants no part of the current neo-Capra craze, of the wish for the truly white White House of TV's *The West Wing* or even *The Contender* by Rod Lurie, another notably conservative Hollywoodite besides Costner making films decidedly sympathetic to liberals.

The film's strongest value is uniquely American, the embrace of youth over the wisdom of experience. Bruce Greenwood's JFK – a remarkably good interpretation as opposed to approximation – suddenly is a golden boy no more. The world has turned impossibly serious, and he must walk into a room that knows he brings the weakest hand to the table, knows he's a rich bootlegger's kid who married up, and bought his way up, and who has no business being in the room except, ironically, he's the President. The tale of the striving Kennedys comes down to this: God apparently loves Irishmen who love the whoring that comes with power more than Irishmen who love the drink that comes without it.

Thirteen Days restores to Kennedy his true profile in courage: that he, oldest surviving sibling of a clan that raised parvenu to professional heights, plus his kid brother and their shanty Irish Beantown buddy O'Donnell, repeatedly faced down a roomful of heavyweights, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Generals Maxwell Taylor and madman Curtis LeMay), his own Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and above all, the god of Dean Acheson ("He was fighting Communists, Kenny, when we were playing ball in school"), plus their own Cabinet whiz kids McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara. Most of them fairly itched to avenge previous decisions made over their heads – the giveaway at Yalta in Acheson's case, and the Bay of Pigs the year before in the military's. At last, they have their moment to do it their way, with only the thin reeds of the Kennedys standing in their way. Their nerves just burn to counter the Kremlin's "shift in doctrinal thinking to First Strike," per Maxwell Taylor. Strike first, invade now, rush past Defcon 2 (5 is peace) to Defcon 1. Call the Red bluff, let 'em fly, take the 80 million dead hit, and move on like men.

The film eavesdrops on both sides of each escalation in tactics as they retreat from every meeting, first the Kennedys, then the crazies, craftily leaving Khrushchev and the Kremlin off-screen, ever uncertain and unknowable. We know that JFK leads the camel through the eye of the blockade needle provided by Bobby (credibly

turned in by Stephen Culp without the fatal attraction in his eye that made Bobby so fearless) but we get to live it for a while. It may not be art, but it's no mean feat either.

It falls to RFK to announce the film's credo at a rest stop: "There's something immoral about abandoning your own judgment," Bobby reassures his brother, and thereby underscores the film's polestar. Great land, America, for by its unwavering embrace of the new and the young it makes its own luck. Up till now, anyway. If W blows us all up and a can of *Thirteen Days* survives, some itinerant Captain Kirk will see that although there wasn't exactly a permanent revolution going on down here, we did teach the young to spit in the face of death warmed over.

Harlan Jacobson

SERIES 7: THE CONTENDERS

Daniel Minahan, USA, 2001

The blight of reality-based television knows no boundaries. But, of course, neither does our appetite for it. What new show with what ridiculous parameters will they come up with next? We've seen people trapped in houses, stranded on islands, and hounded by camera crews wherever they turn. It's obviously unnatural and contrived. I suppose that's where the reality comes in. But how far are the producers and the audience willing to go? At some point, theoretically, things could go beyond sadistic voyeurism to become simply sadism. Shot on digital video, *Series 7: The Contenders*, the debut film from Daniel Minahan, poses these same questions. And since it has no answers it's just another part of the problem.

The title refers to the seventh season of a popular TV show called *The Contenders*. (This is not to be confused with any DreamWorks project. But there's a thought.) Contestants are chosen by lottery, given a gun, assigned a cameraman, and then turned loose on the world to track down and kill each other. The winner, and the person who gets to come back for the next season, is whoever is left alive at the end. "Real people in real danger," intones the melodramatic voiceover for the TV promo.

Dawn Lagarto (Brooke Smith) is the returning champion. She's got a nasty reputation, fueled by the fact that she's eight months pregnant. Some people eat for two: Dawn is killing for two. The film, with its no-holds-barred violence, establishes Dawn's ferocity and remorselessness in the opening sequence. As the shaky handheld video follows her into a suburban grocery store, she blows away an opponent at close range, and the audience is instantly in the realm of *Survivor* as seen through the eyes of *COPS*.

According to the press kit, Minahan cast the film with the aim of ensuring everyone looked as "real" as possible. (I'm trying to determine what that sentence means.) To put it simply, he sifted through actors to find the ones who didn't look like actors. The degree to which they could act becomes something of a moot point; but to be fair to his cast, they all do come across as non-actors. When faced with the moments of terror that punctuate the storyline they do, in fact, look terrified. This conundrum is best summarized by the phrase "act natural."

Dawn's fellow contenders represent a variety of societal types: a blue-collar father, a beautiful teenage girl, a devout middle-aged nurse, a loner, and an artist dying of testicular cancer. These people do feel in tune with reality. When looking at them, there's no disbelief to suspend – and interesting questions arise. Do they appear to be real because of their resemblance to a reality we are familiar with? Or because they bear resemblance to things we've seen on reality-based television? The film works best when it teases the mind with such circular paradoxes. Unfortunately, Minahan decides to undermine the reality he has set forth by bogging it down with truly improbable plot points. Can we believe the nurse as midwife to Dawn's baby? How is it possible in a random lottery draw that two of six people chosen have been involved in a romantic liaison in the past? Reality, TV-based or otherwise, is straining at the seams.

But maybe that's the point. In the film's most interesting twist, the contest's climax can't be broadcast because Dawn has eluded and/or killed members of the camera crew. To catch the audience up, the producers opt for the double whammy of reality-based techniques: the Dramatic Re-creation. As the Dawn look-alike takes center stage, it becomes increasingly unclear what is a reflection of what.

Oddly enough, what one becomes aware of in this spoof of the language of television is that the language's key component is missing. Aside from the promo ads for the show itself – little teasers of the drama to come, bookending the various sequences – there are no commercials for anything else. We can sense where they are supposed to appear: our media-conditioned brains can feel their "natural" rhythms. But they do not appear – definitely a missed opportunity. To give the film a wider perspective, and to reinvest it with a broader video vérité, the gaps should rightly have been filled with advertisements. Instead, the viewer just senses the void where the ads belong – amidst a seemingly sincere critique of a culture made void by its own production. How strange that one can feel nostalgia for garbage.

Chris Chang