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Film Review

*Thirteen Days* the World Waited with Bated Breath

Directed by Roger Donaldson in 2000 and starring Bruce Greenwood as John F. Kennedy (JFK), Steven Culp as Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy (RFK), and Kevin Costner as Special Assistant to the President Kenneth O’Donnell (Kenney), *Thirteen Days*, about the Cuban Missile Crisis, is an incredibly tense historical political thriller. In 1961, the United States secretly orchestrated the Bay of Pigs Invasion - a failed coup attempt against Cuban Leader, Fidel Castro. This military operation was a huge disaster and caused the United States government to enact a trade embargo against Cuba. In retaliation, Fidel Castro strengthened his relationship with the USSR (History.com). Fast forward to early 1962 and thus starts *Thirteen Days*. The film opens to missiles launching in rapid succession then cuts to Technicolor Red, Yellow, and Orange mushroom clouds which quickly morph into a sunrise shot of a U-2 plane sweeping Cuba thereby revealing several USSR missiles being built. *Thirteen Days* is a good film with an interesting take on the Savior trope, an engaging Overcoming the Monster story archetype, superb acting, excellent cinematography but falls short on its narrative structure.

*Thirteen Days* is filled with several clichéd movie tropes. A trope is the expected use of genre-specific characters, situations, and settings used to push a film forward. Early on, the Doting Wife, the Good Ol’ Boys, and the Warhawk tropes quickly emerge. However, there is one trope this viewer was not expecting to see, The Messiah. The Messiah is a Savior character whose story echoes Christ’s. The Messiah is tasked with saving a person, a group of people, or all of humanity. To bring about salvation, The Messiah will endure a sizable sacrifice. To qualify as a Messiah character, they must have one more of the following - True Companions, Betrayal, Persecution, Resurrection, and/or Second Coming (“Messianic Archetype”). In *Thirteen Days*, The Messiah is JFK and his True Companions are RFK and Kenney. True Companions are characters who are family or act like family. JFK and RFK view Kenney as family because they can depend on him (“True Companions”). After viewing the U-2 surveillance and consulting with his administration, JFK, RFK, and Kenney step outside the Oval Office to discuss the situation and find a solution. This is an example of the Messiah stepping into the Garden to council with his True Companions. In the end, The Messiah will make the best decision he can and will pay his sizable sacrifice months later in Dallas, TX. Tropes are an important part of any film, but they only work when used in conjunction with a strong story archetype.

*Thirteen Days* is a prime example of Overcoming the Monster story archetype. An archetype is a set of characters and scenarios based on predefined qualities that viewers easily identify. The seven-story archetypes are Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, The Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. The Overcoming the Monster story archetype is defined as a story where a hero sets out to destroy an Evil (Graves). In *Thirteen Days*, JFK is the hero, but identifying the Monster is trickier. Writers of Overcoming the Monster archetype are often distrustful of viewers making their own connections and generally reveal the Monster. *Independence Day* is a prime example. As soon as the trailer landed, viewers knew right away the Monster is Aliens. Identifying the Monster in *Thirteen Days* is dependent on each viewer because of the biases they bring to films. It is these biases that force the viewer to choose their own Monster. For example, take the EXCOMM scenes where the Warhawks counsel JFK on what the United States’ response to the USSR missiles in Cuba should be. We see the Warhawks chomping at the bit to start a war because of their hatred of Cuba and the USSR. For this viewer, the Monster of *Thirteen Days* is the USSR and its missiles. However, other Monster choices are valid and if examined further, shade the Cuban Missile Crisis in a new light. For the Overcoming the Monster archetype to be effective, its narrative structure must be on point.

A film’s narrative structure must follow the five stages of a story - Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution - and visually present them logically and coherently ("How to Structure a Story: The Fundamentals of Narrative - Article"). A good film will start by setting the story’s stage. It will move from exposition and take the viewer on a rising journey where it will sprint to the story’s climax. Once the falling action is complete, it will land on a resolution. Unfortunately, the narrative structure is where *Thirteen Days* is lacking. This film assumes most viewers know about the Cuban Missile Crisis. What would have helped is a voice-over discussing what led up to *Thirteen Days* - the Bay of Pigs Invasion and Cuba aligning itself with the USSR. The narrative structure of *Thirteen Days* begins with Rising Action as viewers are quickly introduced to Kenney’s family life, the EXCOMM meetings, Chicago’s Mayor Daley, Adlai Stevenson at the UN, and so on. While these scenes push the narrative forward, *Thirteen Days* takes the next two-thirds of the film to do so. This is a disservice to viewers because even though the Cuban Missile Crisis’s final solution is the USSR’s withdrawal from Cuba and the subsequent establishment of a backchannel between the two countries, *Thirteen Days* could have reached its conclusion sooner. After two hours and fourteen minutes, the story’s Climax finally arrives. The scene between RFK and the USSR Ambassador is the Climax because this is where the deal to remove the missiles is brokered. This leaves the last twenty minutes or so for Falling Action and Resolution. The Falling Action element of *Thirteen Days’* narrative structure is when JFK is notified the deal is done. Its Resolution is when The Messiah and his True Companions emerge from the Oval Office as Kennedy’s American University commencement speech plays in the background as the film cuts to black and white. The narrative structure failings aside, *Thirteen Days* redeems itself with its acting.

A good film must have exceptional actors who transform written characters into credible people audiences connect with. Actors must be able to take a script's words, identify their character’s motivations, and become their characters. Because JFK and RFK are historical figures, documented evidence exists of their appearance, mannerisms, speech patterns, gait, etc. and actors taking on JFK must pay homage to historical figures and not be caricatures (Meyer). Bruce Greenwood perfectly embodies JFK. This is best shown midway through *Thirteen Days* where we find JFK relaying to his Trusted Companions the lessons learned from *The Guns of August*. Bruce Greenwood takes control of the scene by slowly rising from the rocking chair and exerting his dominance. When speaking, Bruce’s cadence and speech patterns are spot on. He captures JFK’s charisma through tone and body language. Not only was Bruce Greenwood excellent as JFK but so were Donaldson’s cinematography choices.

*Thirteen Days* makes great cinematography choices, and this helps make it a good film. Cinematography is the scene transitions, camera angles, lighting, and film coloring which helps set the mood and tone to elicit specific feelings. *Thirteen Days* excels is in color, specifically the way Donaldson frames scenes using black and white color ("FILM REVIEW; Talkin' Tough At a Time The Earth Stood Still (Published 2000)"). This technique serves two purposes. First, this reminds viewers they are watching past events and helps give *Thirteen Days* a documentary feel. Second, these scenes work as bookends which subconsciously signal to viewers an important piece of information is starting or ending. For example, after the blockade is in place, the film switches to black and white. Donaldson then brings us to October 18th, 1962, where *Thirteen Days* awakens in color. This is our second introduction to Ambassador Gromyko and his interaction with JFK is critical because when we see Ambassador Gromyko again at the UN, this scene starts in black and white. The viewer knows something important is about to happen - it is the takedown of the USSR. It is scenes such as these that help make *Thirteen Days* a good film.

There are many elements to a good film and *Thirteen Days* meets almost all of them. Its so-so narrative structure aside, its use of the Messiah trope, the Overcoming the Monster story archetype, Bruce Greenwood’s superb acting, and Donaldson’s excellent cinematography choices make for a good film which this reviewer assigns a solid B. Donaldson’s take on the Messiah trope is refreshing because he does not bash us over the head with who the Messiah is - JFK. By using actual NEXCOMM recordings, viewers hear the Messiah’s inner turmoil. Even though the most logical Monster is the USSR and their missiles, viewers can still walk away with different interpretations. Couple Bruce Greenwood’s excellent acting with Donaldson’s complimentary cinematography choices and this propels *Thirteen Days* into the good film territory. Bruce’s JFK and the black and white film coloring show why the earth stood still for *Thirteen Days*. An area *Thirteen Days* is lacking is in its narrative structure. This reviewer wishes Donaldson would have spent a bit more time on the film’s Exposition narrative structure element because having a voice-over explain the cause of the Cuban Missile Crisis would have helped frame why these *Thirteen Days* are important. This reason alone is why *Thirteen Days* receives a B and I can confidently say future historical political thrillers are on my horizon.

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