

The angelic taxi

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 6, 1999](#) issue

Cuban film director Fernando Pérez was inspired to make *Life Is to Whistle* by the work of modernist painter René Magritte, in whose work "reality does not stop being reality, but is, at once, another reality." Magritte's paintings have been described as "elaborate fantasies constructed around commonplace situations." *Life Is to Whistle* is an energetic look at commonplace situations in Havana, where economic life remains difficult but where dream life is open to another reality, perhaps one that is guided by a divine hand.

Whether or not God plays a role in Pérez's vision, the film has a large role for an angel-like, wisdom-dispensing taxi driver who appears when needed and seems to know which strangers need to meet each other. To two of his passengers, the driver observes, in Magritte style: "Life is what happens to you while you are busy doing other things" (a line from John Lennon's "Beautiful Boy").

Among the riders who find themselves protected and cared for by the driver is Mariana, a young ballet dancer who wants desperately to perform the role of Giselle. Unfortunately, Mariana suffers from an overabundance of passion, which draws the ire of her dance director, who wants her to be more restrained not only on the stage but also in her fondness for young men. With the role of Giselle slipping away, Mariana goes to church and promises God that she will never again make love to a man if her director will let her perform as Giselle. Her prayer is answered, but a theological dilemma emerges when she meets her dancing partner and immediately falls in love.

Mariana's story is one of three tales that Pérez weaves together in the style of Latin American magic realism and the spirit of Magritte. The film's narrator is Bebe, a young woman who exists in a parallel universe and occasionally speaks to the camera from underwater, bubbles bobbing to the surface as she talks. Bebe doesn't understand why everyone is not as happy as she is, which leads her to operate as an angelic presence with Elpido, who believes he was abandoned by his mother because he was not the perfect son she expected him to be. The mother's name is

Cuba. Elpido is tempted to leave for the U.S. with an American tourist. Should he wait for his mother to come back for him or should he abandon Cuba—the mother and the island? Both Elpido and Mariana grew up in a state-run orphanage, where Elpido taught Mariana to whistle and to recognize that whistling, not words, is what life is all about.

The third parallel story is about Julia, who suffers from an uncontrollable yawn whenever she hears the word "sex" and grieves over the decision made many years earlier to give up her child. Could that child be Mariana? At the film's conclusion the three figures come together in a driving rain storm in Revolutionary Square. Will Mariana break her promise to God? Does Julia overcome her yawning malady and find the child she abandoned? Will Elpido leave Cuba? Only the angels know for sure.

Life Is to Whistle was one of more than 400 films from 68 countries shown at the 23rd annual Montreal World Film Festival in late August. It was the only Cuban film shown. Another country represented (at least in spirit) with a single film was Tibet. *The Cup*, though a coproduction from Australia and Bhutan, was written and directed by Khyentse Norbu, a lama of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition living in exile in Bhutan, a small country that borders Tibet and India.

The film is in the Tibetan language (a first, according to the film's production notes), and it is Norbu's first feature in a career that started when he served as an adviser on Bernardo Bertolucci's film *Little Buddha*. It is also the first film directed by a Tibetan lama. Norbu's ecclesiastical title is H. E. Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche. Norbu, 38, was recognized at the age of seven as the incarnation of Jamyang Khyentse Wanpo (1820-1892), a religious reformer who played a major role in the preservation and revitalization of Buddhism in Tibet in the 19th century. Norbu studied Buddhist philosophy until the age of 23, and "counts among his root-teachers holders of the four main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, including the 14th Dalai Lama."

With a religious pedigree of that magnitude, one might expect *The Cup* to be a solemn examination of Buddhist thought and practice. Instead it is a warm and energetic story of a group of students at a Tibetan monastery in exile in India. They are as inattentive and restless in their studies as any group of teenagers in a catechism class. In this case, their main concern is the finals of the 1998 World Cup of soccer.

The film was shot at Chokling monastery in a Tibetan refugee settlement in the foothills of the Himalayas. The story focuses on two students who have just escaped across the border from Tibet, where China continues to oppress and control the population, as it has done since the Chinese invaded Tibet in the 1950s. One of the boys has a treasured watch with him, a gift from his mother. Needing additional money to rent a television set to watch the World Cup finals, the older students persuade the newcomer to let them use his watch as collateral with the local Indian video dealer.

Nordu provides a carefully guided tour of a monastery struggling to adapt to modernity. The students' small cubicles are plastered with pictures of soccer stars. The abbot, played in the film by the real-life lama in charge of the monastery, has absolutely no idea what the fuss is all about regarding soccer. Geko, his second in command, describes the match as "two nations fighting for a ball." Slowly pouring his tea into a large bowl-shaped cup, the abbot asks, "What do they get out of all this?" Geko answers, "They get a cup." The abbot sips his tea and ponders this answer. He barely represses a smile and speaks softly, "A cup . . . mmmm."

Nordu balances his career as a film director with his duties as a Buddhist lama in which he is responsible for the monasteries and colleges in his "lineage." In an interview, Nordu defended his involvement in the secular world of moviemaking: "I think it's better to understand the power of this influence than to be its victim. Film has so much power because we're conditioned primarily by what we see, and what we hear. Making a good film, I suppose, is a bit like doing good Buddhist practice. It all begins with an awareness of how we're conditioned."

Cultural and religious conditioning are at the center of a South African film, *A Reasonable Man*, directed by and starring Gavin Hood, with British actor Nigel Hawthorne (last seen as the father in *The Winslow Boy*) as a white South African judge. Sean Raine (Hood) and his wife Jennifer (Janine Esar) are on vacation in Zulu land when they meet a young Zulu boy, Sipho, who is later implicated in the death of a one-year-old child in his village. The child was killed by a blow from an ax. Sipho does not deny swinging the ax but says the child was not his target; he believed he was killing an evil spirit. Sean has reason to empathize with Sipho because as a soldier in Angola he accidentally shot a young boy in the panic of a battle.

Sipho believes that he killed a *tikoloshe*, an evil spirit that takes over the bodies of people. Since it was quite obvious that Sipho did indeed wield the ax, his lawyer

decides to look further into Sipho's belief in evil spirits. The courtroom scene that concludes the film turns on a classic legal question: What constitutes "a reasonable man"? Remarks Hood: "A person is guilty of negligent killing (manslaughter) if he or she kills in a situation where a reasonable man would not have done so. Well, who is a reasonable person? And who is qualified to decide what is reasonable and what is not?"

Sean argues that since Sipho believes that a *tikoloshe* is a real evil spirit that must be killed, then he was, from his perspective, acting in a reasonable manner. South African law does not recognize that such action was reasonable because the law defining manslaughter was written by people who didn't believe in the *tikoloshe*. Sipho does escape the murder charge, but he is not judged "a reasonable man." Seldom has the reality and complexity of multicultural encounters been so intriguingly portrayed.