

“Nothing is entirely serious”—least of all Pablo Larraín’s *Neruda*

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Directed by Pablo Larraín; written by Guillermo Calderón Pablo Larraín’s *Neruda* is a highly unconventional and dissatisfying biopic of the Chilean poet (1904-73). The film focuses in particular on the year 1948, when the beginning of the Cold War led to a sharp change in Chile’s political situation and a climate of increasing repression. Neruda, at the time already a significant artistic and political figure, went into hiding for an extended period and ultimately was able to escape the country.

Initially *Neruda* appears to be a relatively straightforward chronicle of the increasing political pressure coming to bear on the then Communist Party senator, side by side with his personal life and eccentricities. In this initial portion, the voiceover narration offers some stock anti-communist phrases that crudely portray Neruda as a vain and hypocritical intellectual and the communist movement as a whole as a trick played by that particular social type against working people.

For all his rhetoric about a government of workers and peasants, Neruda is depicted as being very much at ease playfully trading barbs with his political opponents in the Senate. Receiving news of the impending illegality of the Communist Party from some mortified working class comrades in the middle of a ridiculous bohemian party, however, he awkwardly demurs and seems eager to go back to the festivities.

The distinctive editing style prevailing at this stage of the film already suggests a certain dreamlike quality and warns against taking the events being represented too literally. Conversations are often shown in a manner that deliberately disrupts the viewer’s sense of continuity of time and space. The director achieved this effect by shooting those scenes multiple times in distinct locations and then patching together the final

version by drawing from each.

Once the poet goes underground, the axis of the narrative shifts decisively to the relationship between Neruda and a young police inspector tasked with his capture. Among other things, we eventually realize that the narrator’s voice belongs to the inspector, whose name he himself reveals to be Óscar Peluchonneau, though in a manner that suggests further narrative complications.

Soon enough one also begins to realize that the story of Neruda’s cloak-and-dagger escapes and cat-and-mouse toying with the police is too preposterous to be taken literally. Neruda foils the inspector’s attempts at every turn, leaving behind detective novels to taunt but also communicate with him in an increasingly intimate manner.

As the chase goes on, the character of the police inspector, played by noted and talented actor Gael Garcia Bernal, also accrues more and more fantastical and implausible traits. Part Inspector Javert as Neruda’s nemesis, Peluchonneau at times begins to resemble the bumbling Inspector Clouseau.

Correspondingly, the film’s phases in and out of different genres, including elements of comedy, thriller, or striking at other times a purely lyrical tone. In submitting *Neruda* to the festival at Cannes, apparently the director left the information concerning its genre blank. Perhaps this sort of approach was intended to mirror Neruda’s style, which, considering his work in the aggregate, contained a number of disparate stylistic elements. But Larraín is no Neruda, and the results here are unserious and irritating.

The film then spins off of this axis in a predictable direction given the air of literary conceit that eventually settles around the whole enterprise. Neruda’s wife suggests to a visibly disturbed Peluchonneau that he

may simply be the figment of the poet's imagination, perhaps created while in prison to pass time after his arrest. In other ways the film suggests that Peluchonneau could also be a fictional device for Neruda to embellish his tales as a fugitive and rebel, particularly to impress the ladies.

The dramatic charge of *Neruda* shifts then to Peluchonneau, who, cognizant of his unreality, and thrown into a crisis by his status as a mere supporting character, regains his position at the end of the film by somehow attaining the status of co-author and co-creator of Neruda himself.

Not surprisingly, Larraín has explained, lamely, that his film is at bottom about "how we need to tell stories in order to survive." But there are stories and there are stories.

Neruda's life intersected with many of the great and decisive events of the twentieth century—from the Spanish Civil War, when Neruda became a Communist, to the Pinochet dictatorship, which reportedly played a direct role in his death. In between, the enormous crimes of Stalinism and its appeal to a layer of initially well-meaning and important figures; the cultural front of the Cold War, pitting two political camps of significant intellectuals and artists against each other; the international impact of the Cuban revolution, and many more developments, all of which affected Neruda's life and art, and were affected in turn by them.

Virtually none of this finds its way into Larraín's film. A few stinging remarks by right-wing senators reminding Neruda of his party's support for the soon-to-be dictator Gabriel González Videla could evoke the catastrophic political record of the Stalinist Popular Front. More likely, they are placed there to help establish the portrayal of Neruda as a lovable hypocrite.

In another scene we see a single shot of future dictator Augusto Pinochet, then in charge of an isolated prison camp where Neruda might have been taken had he been arrested. The audience in the theater gasps, but the scene turns out to be a gratuitous celebrity sighting since there is no discernible attempt to link the events of 1948 to the later, bloodier political developments.

As we already noted in reviewing Larraín's *No* (2012), as well as *Jackie* (2016), although happy to employ them as an empty canvas, the director seems programmatically uninterested in tackling complex

historical and political issues and exhibits a certain cluelessness to boot.

It should be noted that an investigation of Neruda's deeply personal traits, including, conceivably, by means of a setting up a completely fabricated co-creative tension with fictional characters, does not by itself constitute an erroneous starting point. Even taking some liberties with the historical facts concerning the poet's life, as Larraín does repeatedly, could under certain circumstances be justified.

And as a matter of fact, in spite of its overall weakness, a few of *Neruda*'s scenes still manage to express something interesting and valuable.

A drag queen in a brothel, the scene of one of Neruda's daring escapes, is later interrogated by the police inspector, and narrates a powerful if fleeting exchange with the poet that expressed a profound equality and human connection someone in the cop's position could never understand. A working class Communist militant, who initially appears to be one of Neruda's aspiring groupies, questions his political motives publicly and with increasing audacity. A delirious Peluchonneau reminds the audience that for all his faults Neruda was able to articulate the deep sentiments of the oppressed, even as the poet is shown whoring around in Paris.

These scenes surprisingly express something true, and in an artistically convincing manner. But this seems more or less a sort of happy accident, as the eclectic devices employed by Larraín are not put to use seriously or judiciously. They are not intended to pursue a deeper truth that, without necessarily placing them front and center by conventional narrative means, would have to meaningfully engage the broader historical and political currents in which Neruda moved.

In describing the manner in which Neruda's poetry informed the film and its structure, the director remarked, "nothing is entirely serious." A figure of Neruda's magnitude, along with the conditions in which he lived, deserved a different approach.



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