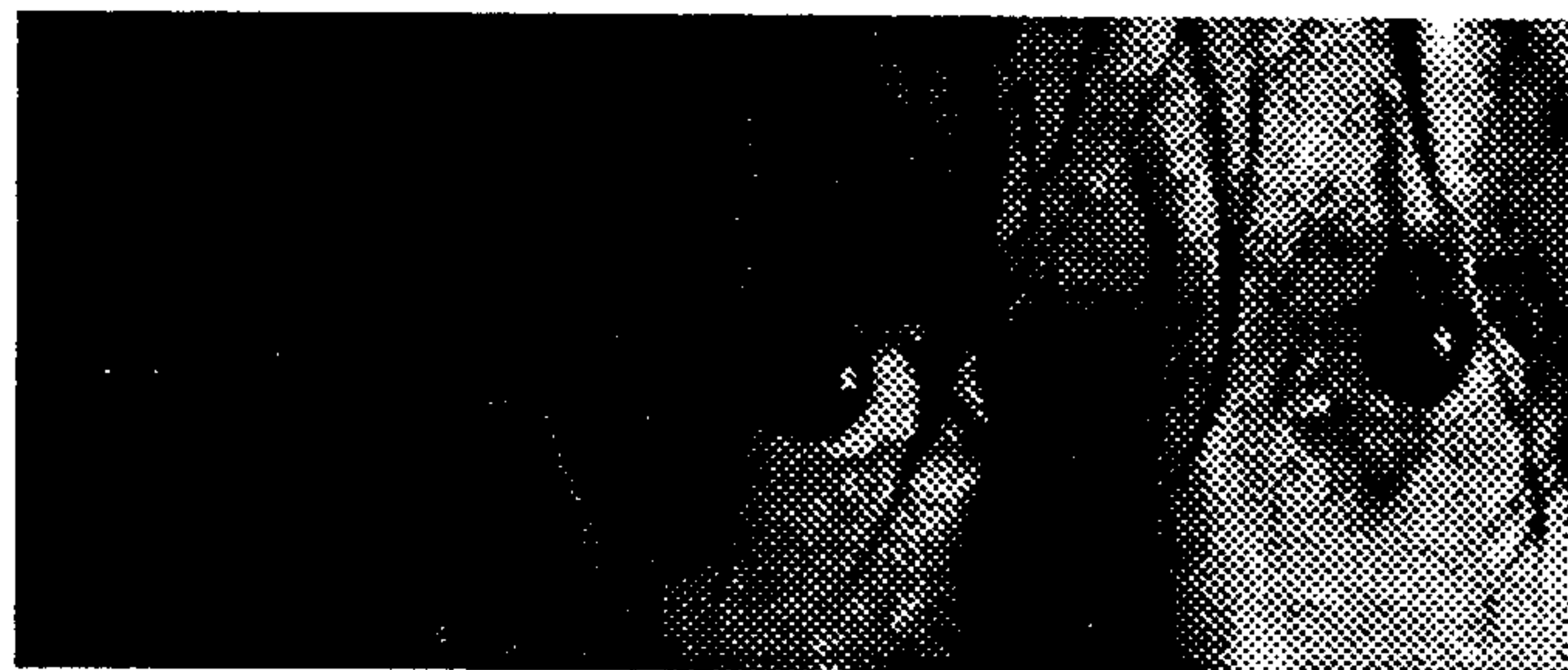


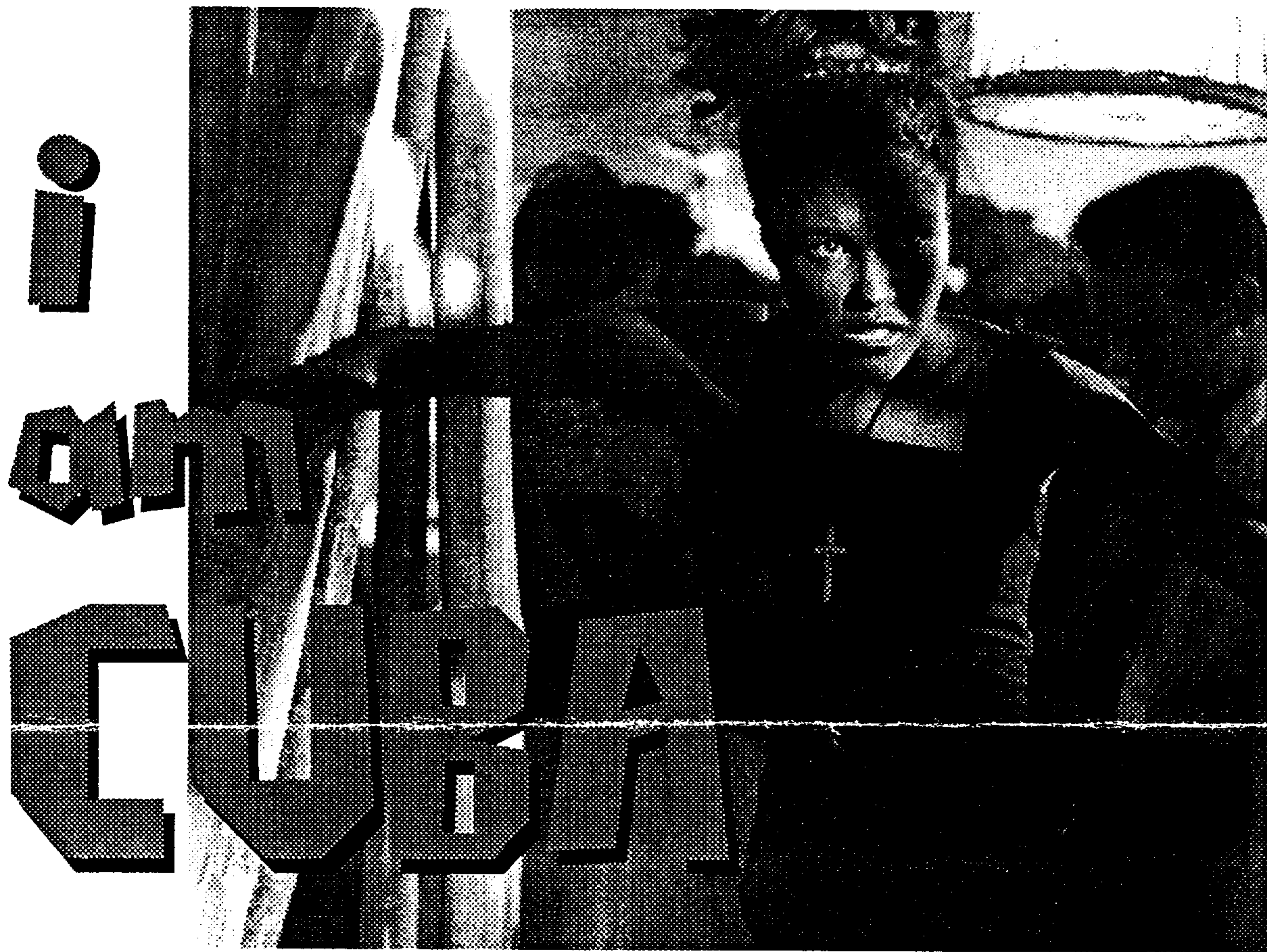
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# NEW YORK

MARCH 20, 1995

DAVID DENBY

## The Lukewarm Zone

*'Outbreak,' America's first big-budget viral thriller, never quite heats up;  
'I Am Cuba,' a Russo-Cubano archival find, is overripe and delirious.*

**I Am Cuba**, PLAYING AT FILM FORUM, IS AN OUT-landish hybrid of propaganda and aestheticism. It's as if a boar had mated with a macaw, or a potato with a row of sugarcane. The result: The newborn spud sprouts feathers. The Soviet director Mikhail Kalatozov and cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky, who had worked together on the celebrated 1958 Soviet movie *The Cranes Are Flying*, went to Havana in 1962, right around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, to make a propaganda film. Poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko tagged along; the three hooked up with Cuban novelist Enrique Piñeda Barret. In 1964, after much travel, considerable immersion in prerevolutionary (i.e., colonial) culture, and many meetings with officials, they concocted this fabulous monster, which has never been commercially distributed in this country. (The movie is being brought out by Francis Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and a small distribution company; it will soon be released nationwide.) Set in the final days of the corrupt Batista regime, the movie is nominally a work of propaganda. But the filmmakers, es-

caping the austerities of the Soviet film bureau, Mosfilm, fell under the spell of the brilliant sky, the heat, the sultry-sexy, full-bodied women and handsome men. Whatever their intentions, they wound up making a sensuously beautiful movie. *I Am Cuba* is certainly propaganda, but the stiff, Marxist-Leninist platitudes are embodied in a languorous, art-for-art's-sake visual scheme that contradicts the message at every turn.

There are no central characters, only long vignettes of prerevolutionary oppression. American businessmen in white suits sit around in bars, laughing and making crude jokes. Saintry Latin girls are menaced by carousing Marines. A resolute sharecropper sets fire to his land rather than let it fall into the hands of the United Fruit Company. Fidel and Communism are irresistibly on the march. Heroic student radicals, bursting with idealism, go proudly to their deaths for *la revolución*. "I am Cuba . . ." intones a nameless female, over and over, in the kitschy drone of Yevtushenko prose poetry. *Viva la revolución!* Yet from the opening sequence, in which the camera, borne aloft in a helicopter, approaches the gleaming island from the sea and then passes over it, the black-and-white images are astoundingly fluid and expressive. Using filters, the filmmakers made the palm trees look like huge white feathers scraping a darkened sky. At the Havana nightspots, the camera, intoxicated, spins through a phantasmagoria of faces; it glides down an outdoor hotel elevator and then wanders, insinuating as a gigolo, through crowds of vamping, luscious girls in bathing suits; finally, it ducks into a swimming pool and heads underwater, as if to cool itself off. Capitalist decadence has never looked more enticing, more fantastic. *I Am Cuba* could be a hymn to the liberation of appetite.

The movie doesn't work, of course, either as art or as propaganda. The filmmakers become so excited about the visual possibilities of each episode that they keep forgetting what revolutionary points they're supposed to be making. Even when an oppressed peasant grandiloquently dies, they spin off into sheer fantasia, whirling the camera around like maniacs. After a while, the meanings slide into reverse: Sinful Havana looks so beautiful that one longs for the continuation of Batista's rule.

*I Am Cuba* is the first, and perhaps the only, work of Communist decadence, and it suggests that what the Soviets saw in Cuba was not all that different from what the Mafia saw there—sex, sunshine, freedom from restraint. Compared with such splendor, the movie's revolutionary promises of "land" and a more equitable future come off as pallid clichés. Communism was never right for Cuba, and this movie suggests why. That none of Castro's dreams came true only enhances *I Am Cuba's* irresistible, bittersweet aura as a sport of history, an ironic found object.

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