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As the Third World Turns

BY J. HOBERMAN

THE TOP OF THE WHALE. Directed and written by Raul Ruiz. Produced by Monica Tegelaar and Kees Kasander. Distributed by Fabian Films. At the Thalia, June 20 and 21.

THE WALL. Directed and written by Yilmaz Güney. Produced by Marin Karmitz. Released by Kino International. At the Public Theater, June 20-26.

BELIZAIRE THE CAJUN. Directed and written by Glen Pitre. Produced by Pitre and Allan Durand. Released by Skouras Pictures. At the New Carnegie Cinema.

Raul Ruiz is a born storyteller, with an admirable disdain for narrative. The films he makes, mainly for French TV, at the astonishing rate of a half-dozen or so each year, are semiotic funhouses, at once gaudy and labyrinthine, as doggedly talky as they are visually extravagant. Ruiz, who exiled himself from Chile in 1973, is sometimes described as an aesthetic odd man out; actually he stands at the confluence of several traditions—film and television, the B-movie and the underground, third world and Europe.

Flamboyant impoverishment is Ruiz's trademark, and he compounds it with a bland, "underdeveloped" disrespect for European culture. Not long ago, perhaps in response to an observation made by his sometime collaborator Gilbert Adair, Ruiz knocked off Racine's *Berenice* in the manner of a Mexican hacienda meller. ("Except for his subject matter," Adair wrote, "Ruiz has never ceased to be a Third World filmmaker, for whom the Aristotelian unities respected by Racine constitute just another low-budget, B-movie parameter.") *The Top of the Whale*, which is screening Friday and Saturday at the Thalia Soho, is one of Ruiz's more overtly political films—a doleful satire of Western hubris, sending up anthropology, colonialism, and even the neo-Marxist equation between the proletariat and the third world.

Produced with Dutch financing in 1982 and subtitled "A Film About Survival," *The Top of the Whale* is set in an alternative future. It opens in the Soviet Dutch Republic, with a chance meeting on the terrace of the Hotel Malcolm X. Overlooking the bleak North Sea, a Dutch anthropologist and his wife Eva encounter Don Narcisso Cambos, a self-described "Communist millionaire," who mentions that he has the last two Indians of some massacred tribe at his Patagonian villa. As the anthropologist's specialty is "collective telepathy among primitive tribes," it's a foregone conclusion that the action will soon shift to somewhere under Capricorn.

For all its melodramatic music and colored filters, *The Top of the Whale* is less baroque than *The Three Crowns of the Sailor* and *City of Pirates*, the Ruiz flicks featured at the 1984 and 1985 New York Film Festivals. The angles aren't so extreme, and the compositions are less eye-popping (no shots from the inside of anyone's mouth). Even more than those, this film was made from nothing: two locations (an island off Rotterdam serves as Patagonia) and a handful of blatantly



A Ruiz "Indian" from *The Top of the Whale*: Too much exploitation made him strange.

polyglot performers. Language is Ruiz's most potent special effect. *The Top of the Whale* lapses into and out of French, English, German, Spanish, Dutch, and the invented lingo of the Patagonian Indians. To a degree, Ruiz is satirizing the primacy of contemporary linguistic theory, but in common with poststructural filmmakers like Yvonne Rainer and the Wollen-Mulvey team, he uses language to derange an otherwise ordinary image. Of course, the Ruiz overlay tends toward the belligerently fantastic. A pointless anecdote suddenly becomes the description of a two-kilometer-high cat, a mirage created by a "natural video system."

Throughout *The Top of the Whale* Europeans bore each other with windy stories, while the Indians—a hilariously vacant yet menacing pair—make abrupt, seemingly pointless appearances. (As Eva tells Anita, her disconcertingly androgynous daughter, "Too much exploitation has made them strange.") While Don Narcisso waxes sentimental about the thousands of Indians massacred in Patagonia, the anthropologist tries to learn their language. Too bad for him that it appears to consist of one phrase; whatever he shows them, they call "yamas gutan." Later, he discovers that Indians exchange names each month and invent a new language every day. After all, they're telepathic. "I deserve a vacation in Rumania," he declares, leaving Patagonia for Europe.

Although—as Manny Farber wrote of Jean-Luc Godard—Ruiz is a master of "long stretches of aggressive, complicated nothingness," *The Top of the Whale* doesn't lack for events. Don Narcisso gives Eva the house, Anita is impregnated by a mirror (do we call this deadpan joke "Lacanic"?), Narcisso's assistant commits suicide by (what else?) cutting out his tongue. In the end, Eva succeeds in domesticating the Indians, training them to come for tea—there's a superb overhead shot of fluttering hands and cups—and to discuss Mozart in English. Can Ruiz be so tamed? I suspect we'll have some sort of answer come this Christmas when Cannon (who else?) is scheduled to release his big buck version of *Treasure Island*.

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