Document Citation

Title	**Filters, exile and cunning**
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Source	*Monthly Film Bulletin*
Date	1984 Dec
Type	interview
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Ruiz, Raoul (1941-2011), Puerto Montt, Chile
Film Subjects	Diálogo de exilados (Dialogue of exiles), Ruiz, Raoul, 1974 L'hypothèse du tableau volé (The hypothesis of the stolen painting), Ruiz, Raoul, 1978 Tres tristes tigres (Three sad tigers), Ruiz, Raoul, 1968 Mémoire des apparences (Life is a dream), Ruiz, Raoul, 1986

Monthly Film Bulletin #57 - Dec. '84

Raul Ruiz

Problems of time, space and perception: Ian Christie interviews Râúl Ruiz.

Your first film *Tres tristes tigres* was part of an unprecedented explosion of film-making in Chile around 1968.

RAUL RUIZ: It began several years before, mainly in Brazil, Argentina and of course Cuba, but also in Peru and Central America, and there were many reasons for this Latin American 'new wave'. Perhaps the most important factor was the aesthetic of small, portable equipment that came from Godard and the French New Wave: the new Eclair and Arriflex cameras and the aesthetic of direct sound were vital to all the new cinemas of Latin America. They gave us a way to react against the indigenous industry, which at that time was monopolised by Mexicans and Argentinians. We wanted to use film to express the everyday life of our countries, our ways of speaking, our particular accents—not that uniform accent adopted by the Mexicans, which was not even a real Mexican accent, but a sort of Latin American abstract accent that prevented us from talking directly to our own culture.

But you were also impressed by Mexican commercial films and you have tried to recreate their melodramatic quality in your own recent work.

All the new Latin American film-makers of the 60s were of petit-bourgeois origin and we were ashamed of Mexican films, because they were seen by ordinary people, the working-class, and they seemed to reflect the deeply rooted bad taste of the Latin American temperament. So I think our hostility was aesthetic, in the bad sense of the term, based on the fact that these were popular, industrially produced films. But looking back at what we set out to do, it was as if we were trying to turn a theoretical object into a reality, and to achieve this reality you had to go to Europe. Paradoxically, our films were made to be shown first in Europe, for which some kind of Latin American 'attitude' had to be invented. But the films of the new cinema movement in Chile weren't full of exotic local colour; they tended to show us in all our were not successful in European festivals. I would say they were only 'good' when they discovered the freedom to be 'bad'.

When you became involved with Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government, did this mean that you had to change your attitude to cinema and to audiences?

Not really, except that this was the point at which I started to make openly experimental films, trying to create new relationships between films and people and their political context. I developed an interest in new techniques for filming interviews and using ordinary people as actors. I was trying to invent a new and more appropriate dramaturgy for the times we were living through, but this became somewhat paradoxical when I found that to make a film I had first to write a play, and then decide whether it was worth bothering to film it! It all took a great deal of time, although the actual cost of making films then was often less than the cost of buying a car. I was also forced to get money from friends for film-making, because I couldn't ask for money from the institution where I was an official.

My films created a lot of hostility, because they didn't work as agit-prop, which is what was expected. I tried this approach, but found it totally uninteresting from a cinematic and cultural point of view. It was like doing your military service—an obligation without value or meaning. I wanted to make an intervention, to put the camera to work inside a very complicated political situation and this inevitably makes complicated films, which will always be viewed negatively by the authorities. So *The Expropriation*, *Socialist Realism Considered as One of the Fine Arts*, and my short films about torture and Allende, were bound to be viewed with suspicion. And it was a crazy period: I remember that I was due to start a film two days after the coup *about* the coup.

Chilean refugees after the coup of 1973 went to a variety of European countries. Why did you choose to stay in France?

I didn't decide on France: I was already there and had no money to leave and no visa to go to Berlin, which was actually my first choice. Later I realised there were advantages to France, where everybody is considered foreign and there is a really open society, with all the confusion, corruption and difficulties this implies, but still with the freedom to see the world for what it is and to act. People in France are still confused about my nationality; they often refer to me as "my Brazilian, or Portuguese, or Mexican friend" — which I quite like, because it's difficult to be Chilean all the time.

The first film you made in exile (apart from completing *The Expropriation*) was *Dialogue of Exiles* in 1974, which provoked a storm of controversy among fellow exiles. Do you still feel it was the right film for you to have made at that juncture?

Well, it wasn't really controversial. There was complete unanimity in its denunciation from all sides! But it was the only kind of film that I felt I could make. The reality of that period was so rich and hectic: exiles of all

kinds were arriving in a constant stream while we were actually making the film. So we conceived it as a discussion piece, looking forward into the life of exile that lay ahead for all of us, speculating about it and criticising it before the event, so to speak. We incorporated things that happened around us into the film as it progressed, making a kind of typology of exile, a basis for debate, as I had tried to do in Chile under Popular Unity. But that discussion never happened.

One sequence in particular caused outrage, where you showed the money collected on behalf of the exiles being frittered away and lost.

At that time I was very interested in a Brechtian way of making films, and for this sequence I actually borrowed Brecht's account of how money can disappear without being stolen. But I had no idea it would all be taken so literally. In fact, it was during the making of *Dialogue of Exiles* that I discovered the official art of the nineteenth century, especially the history painting of the First Empire in France, and this helped me to make my first films in France, after I had decided to become a French film-maker. So I started from basic things—history and culture—and these led me to the work of the novelist Pierre Klossowski, whose novel *La Vocation suspendue* I filmed in what I hoped would be a recognisable 'French' style.

I was surprised by the French reaction to *La Vocation suspendue* because no one laughed during screenings, except me. I should explain something about Klossowski, since he is very little known in Britain. Indeed I found his theory of representation hard to understand, so I asked him to explain it to me in five minutes—which he did in even less than five minutes, as follows. He believes that the unconscious doesn't exist in each individual, but between individuals, and so it is in a constant state of flux. This unconscious is like a crowd, a social organism, which is governed by certain stereotypes which he calls simulations. Such simulations are what cinema can show, and thus portray the main stereotypes of our society, of our deepest reality. From this explanation, it was very easy to make the film.

You then started to make a film about Klossowski for television, which became *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*.

I asked Klossowski to tell me about his life and he promptly went on holiday to Italy, in typically French style, leaving me in Paris with a film to make. I had no script and only some extras, so I began to improvise a fiction from day to day. At this time, I wrote in a special kind of Spanish, suitable for translation into French, and the text became a sort of parody of Klossowski. When it was translated it sounded even more like a parody of Raymond Roussel; and so *The Hypothesis* became a film obliquely influenced by Roussel.

Since you started your French career you've made an extraordinary number of films, probably more than any other contemporary film-maker, yet very few of these have been shown in conventional ways, either on television or in the cinema.

They have mostly been shown by television—in the afternoons, within magazine programmes, or during summer evenings. And they have been shown in festivals, even if not in normal cinemas. If you consider me a film-maker, then I have certainly made a lot of films; but if you think of me as a television programme maker, then I work like any other television employee. In fact, I make three or four long films each year and between five and ten short films. This year [1983] will be exceptional because I will make seven long films and about ten shorts. But I don't work especially quickly, I just work all the time.

When I started to work for INA [L'Institut National de l'Audiovisuel], which is a sort of Channel 4 in France, interested in experimental production and new approaches to the relationship between television and the public, there was great freedom of action, and so I made a lot of films for them between 1976 and 1980. Then they appointed a new president, who completely changed the style of production and decided to abolish the notion of film authorship. After this we were always accompanied by journalists and were no longer free to make our films. So I stopped making films for INA and discovered that I could introduce my B-movie style of film-making into Holland and Portugal. But before I discovered this, I started to work with friends from INA and other areas of television on a long film which we shot on Sundays. I cooked for them, no one got paid, and we worked all day for many Sundays. The result is a film [still] in progress, *Le Borgne* [*The One-eyed Man*], of which we have finished six segments.

From this experience, I realised that there are many people who want to make films outside all institutions—and small institutions can be more difficult than large ones—without any moral or political justification. They just want to make films and play with ideas. So we embarked on a new mode of production that was home-movie based, yet with all the latest professional equipment at our disposal. We did this quite openly, but didn't notify the authorities or invite their involvement in any way. The effect of this on technicians who work in normal television throughout the week is to release their creativity, which is normally blocked. Recently, when we made a feature-length film of Racine's *Berenice* in this way (everyone working on it took their holidays at the same time to work for free), two of the electricians who were at first very suspicious turned up to work extra hours and became really enthusiastic about the new system of open, democratic production that we are trying to build.

Any description of your films makes them sound incredibly varied and eclectic, but what is the underlying strategy as far as you are concerned?

I am not sure because I have often become interested in a subject simply because there was a film to be made. For instance, I was asked to make three films on botany and became very interested in the metaphysical implications of plants and gardens. But I was already intrigued by the symbology of castles before I was asked to make a film about Chambord, *Les Divisions de la nature*, which is a kind of anti-castle in its design, so I approached that with special enthusiasm and knowledge.

But the underlying issues for me are to do with the politics of institutions; what it means to be a militant for a cause; what the significance is of belonging to a country, to a culture—being Chilean, French, British. This comes directly from my own experience as a Latin American living in Europe. Other themes come from the reception of my films, like *Dialogue of Exiles*; and more recently, metaphysical problems that arise from the practical activity of making films—problems about time, space and perception. The simple transition from one shot to another, by means of a cut, is a strange process and the main aim of my films is to emphasise this feeling of strangeness.

You have recently become very interested in special effects, not in the *Star Wars* sense, but at the artisanal level of what can be done with mirrors and filters. How did this interest develop?

First you have to remember that in Latin America, and especially in Chile, there is a sort of puritanism about the activity of photography. Whether in still or movie photography, you are not supposed to make any intervention between the object and the concern. No doubt this belief was reinforced by André Bazin and the Italian neo-realists, to the point where there is a superstition that if you intervene between the world and the camera, the miracle that everyone expects won't happen. There is also the traditional Latin American view of the world as abstract, or symbolic, so that a good Latin American film-maker doesn't have to bother about anything natural. You know nothing about the weather, the names of trees, or anything like that. So when I made films in Chile, I always used the 28 mm. lens, no filters and a very limited range of angles. When I started working in France, I had to make beautiful images and began to use filters, at first in an ironical way. Then I realised that all the images I had ever made were ironical anyway; and I started to use filters as objects, to treat the filtered images as objects and to experiment with prisms and mirrors. Then came front projection, and through Henri Alekan, whom I first worked with on *Les Divisions de la nature*, I discovered that there was a long tradition of special effects stretching back beyond the invention of cinema. As you know, Méliès drew on the techniques of the *fête foraine*; and this use of mirrors originated in the seventeenth-century theatre. Most of the modern miniature and mirror-based effects can be traced back to the baroque theatre.

But what interests me particularly is that these technical effects only worked for a single viewer at a time — the king — whereas with the cinema the camera is that single privileged spectator on behalf of an infinite audience. Working with these special effects, I feel involved with many very ancient problems to do with vision. And recently I have discovered that I can join forces with people who are working with computers — like Beauviala, the inventor of the Aaton camera, who is interested in the problem of perspective. He is trying to build a computer

into the camera which will automatically correct the normal perspective distortion, something I have been trying to do with mirrors; so we have agreed to spend some time working together on these problems to see what results from intervening in the actual formation of the cinematic image.

It's ten years since the Chilean coup forced you into exile and you have now worked for longer in Europe as a film-maker than you did in Chile. What do you see as the future of cinema in Europe?

I still feel very ignorant about European cinema, indeed about cinema in general, since I have spent most of my time with television people. But what is interesting in France is that the difference between conventional and experimental cinema is not very great. The rules that experimental film-makers and commercial film-makers have to follow are almost the same. I don't know if this is good or bad, but it's interesting to see the same elements, the same money and actors, involved in both commercial and experimental films. The point of contact is the salon, the social life connected with the power of the upper-class, and this means that the films you make will almost inevitably be concerned in some way with the interests of that class. It's very difficult if you want to make a genuinely political film or to use populist elements in an experimental film, as I do sometimes—like pulp literature, bad singers or kitsch objects. These things are not well-received in France, where you feel there is always a social compromise involved, so it's difficult to make either political films or films that address France as a totality.

In English cinema, I feel the problem is the opposite. There is no connection between the experimental and the commercial sectors. New equipment is given to people making commercial films who have no idea how to use it, or desire to do so. If you have this separation of elements, it's very difficult to develop a cinematographic movement. In France, we have seen how video can be used to make films very quickly and easily if you respect a certain conventional system of cutting shots together. But to do this you have to have the film completely in your head, which forces you to make very limited films, usually narrative, of the sort that can be completely pre-visualised. I believe it is more important than ever to bring film-makers and the inventors of new techniques together, to prevent those new techniques simply prolonging the traditional cinema.

(From an interview recorded in London on June 15, 1983, for a forthcoming *Visions* programme on Channel 4.) ■