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SNAKES AND LADDERS TELEVISION GAMES

Ian Christie

> We are never free until some institution frees us, and liberty cannot exist till it is declared by authority.
>
> G. K. Chesterton, *Manalive*
>
> The era of simulation begins with the liquidation of all referents.
>
> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*

There is an optimism surrounding television in Britain that strikes many foreigners as touching, or absurd. Even before the advent of the fourth channel, which at least offers some concrete grounds for hope, the belief that positions can be won and defended within television, that progressive programmes can be made and are worth struggling for, the conviction that television is 'too important' to be ignored — these are by no means uncommon views in Britain (at least in progressive circles), but they are far from common in America or most other parts of Europe.

This is no doubt partly due to the great difference between the institutional structure of television in Britain compared with most other countries, and the corresponding difference in relations between cinema and television. While the tradition of (relative) independence and public service continue to hold sway in Britain, television in the United States is essentially a marketing device and is seen in almost entirely defensive terms by the American left (despite the existence of PBS enclaves and cable systems). In France, television has long been seen as a more or less direct instrument of the state and ruling class, despite the reforms following May '68. Although the French cinema is heavily dependent on television for production finance, this 'support' continues to be negotiated at arm's length so that there is at least an apparent autonomy of the cinema sector. Only Germany provides a marked exception to the general climate of suspicion that surrounds other people's television, and this is largely due to the reputation of Westdeutscher Rundfunk's *Arbeiterfilm* series and record of adventurous funding of (not least British and American) independent filmmakers by the second German channel, ZDF.(ZDF supported Ruiz's first film in exile, *Utopia* or *The Scattered Body and the World Upside Down,* ironic juxtaposition of utopian socialist theory with Latin American reality). Needless to say, these are only impressions, strictly relative to the standpoint and interests of the observer, but it is equally true that detailed *comparative* knowledge of television remains rare.

From a British perspective, the case of Raul Ruiz as a 'television filmmaker' raises interesting, if awkward, questions about the radical potential of television. Interesting because the corpus of his work over five years suggests an achievement unparalleled elsewhere in European cinema or television, a 'secret cinema' that could only have been developed within the interstices of television. But awkward because it does not fit within the contours of

'progressive' work in and around British television; because it does not essentially *take television seriously,* regarding it as something to be subverted, taken for a ride — and dropped, if the opportunity presents itself. Ruiz of course has a cast-iron alibi: he is an 'official' political refugee from fascist Chile, and he undoubtedly possesses the qualities of an exile claimed by Brecht. 'Emigration is the best school of dialectics and exiles are the best dialecticians. It is change that has exiled them and they are interested only in change. From minute signs they deduce the most fantastic conclusions. If their enemies prevail they calculate the price of their victory, and they have a sharp eye for contradictions.' (this text is quoted, ironically, at the beginning of Ruiz's 1974 *Dialogue of Exiles*). He describes in the following interview his sense of alienation as a Latin American living in the cultural capital of the world that is Paris.

There is also the legacy of Chile before 1973 to be reckoned with. Although he worked for a short time as a programme editor and made some short films for television, Ruiz was not closely involved with television in Chile, other than as a spectator. His recollections of Chilean television during Popular Unity suggest an almost Warholian non-selectivity, compounded by chronic lack of experience and finance. The visit of a foreign head of state was covered at such length and in such detail that viewers were treated to close-ups of the food being eaten at the official banquet. On another occasion, a broadcast was given over to the workers of a factory who presented an extended amateur variety show, which included a knife-throwing act that left one performer bleeding in the background throughout the rest of the show. But even the dubious democracy of such 'spontaneous' television was 'balanced' shortly after by an equally extended series of pro-apartheid films from South Africa. Isolated and impoverished, Chilean television was forced to show what it could get cheaply.

Such 'coarse television' is too little known and studied by European media specialists (although there were some tantalising glimpses from Latin America and South East Asia in Richard Cawston's *Television Around the World*). However it forms the immediate background to Ruiz's encounter with 'metropolitan' television in France. His arrival followed shortly after a major reform of the discredited ORTF, which created a number of new institutions with more limited functions. One of these was the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, with a brief to commission and co-produce broadly 'experimental' work for transmission by any of the three channels. In the first flush of independence, INA drew heavily on the established avant-garde, funding work by Duras, Godard, Rivette, Syberberg and the like, and also regularly co-producing with ZDF (Dwoskin and Akerman were two beneficiaries of this alliance). When it became apparent that a relatively high proportion of the work commissioned was unacceptable to the channels, INA's relative freedom of action was curtailed. INA however produced Ruiz's feature-length *La Vocation suspendue,* and three further films, while this entrée also led to direct commissions from the second channel, *Antenne 2.*

If Ruiz became a 'television filmmaker' almost inadvertently — or at least as a reaction against the futility of trying to survive as an autonomous *auteur* — he has found that the strictures of television, like those of exile, can be put to good use. What television offers him is a grid, a codified set of genres, assumptions, rules, against which he can test his own observations and

theories. Instead of making 'exile's films' for the international art cinema – films of nostalgia for a lost referent – he has adopted the role of the 'professional outsider', adopting Montesquieu's ironic stance to produce a series of *lettre chiliennes,* which speak politically without appearing to do so (and thus conform to the requirements of political refugee status in France). Except that Ruiz actually *is* an outsider and *does* view the machinery of French culture and politics with some detachment and ambivalence. He had descrived the peculiar standpoint of the Chilean intellectual as 'living in a permanent state of disgust with one's milieu', torn between a longing for the sophistication of North America and Europe and a distinctively Chilean chauvinism. As a Latin American filmmaker he had suffered the dilemma of being condemned to both a primitivism and an avant-gardism, which excludes the possibility of 'normal' fiction cinema. Forced by the military coup to break off the living dialictic between theory and practive which developed under Popular Unity, he has had to invent a new practice and a new persona in Europe.

Two main strategies inform Ruiz's approach to television: they are *parody* and *literalism,* both 'rationalist' in their pedigree and both calculated to subvert the normal discourse of television. Parody, as Ruiz observes, is also a very mysterious thing and its purpose is by no means only ridicule: it can be an acute (and sympathetic) form of analysis or exposition. This is how it functions in what is perhaps his most complex television work, *L'Hypothèse du tableau volé.* Commissioned as an arts documentary on the obscure (even for French audiences) writer, Pierre Klossowski, after Ruiz's adaptation of the former's novel, *La Vocation suspendue,* his approach was dutiful:

> I looked at television programmes on famous personalities and observed that the usual format is a voice-over which poses questions. So I kept to this format and developed it into a kind of philosophical dialogue. This is the basic format which is exactly the same as any banal television programme on almost any subject.

The difference is that for his *conte philosophique,* Ruiz had *invented* a series of pictures by a fictitious painter (invented by Klossowski) and had an actor play the collector who debates with an unseen voice-over the history and meaning of the pictures. 'The only novelty', Ruiz insists, 'is that I took this commission very seriously and tried to make a real film.' The resulting film is certainly an extraordinary summary and extension of Klossowski's universe, as well as a provocative exploration of Ruiz's ideas about the cinema's relation to narrative and non-narrative representation, but it is also a mockery of television arts programmes, because it is serious in a wholly different way. Beyond this it is an anomalous object itself: unsuited to television transmission (with its dark, smoke-diffused images in black and white), and equally unsuited to cinema distribution (too short for a feature, hovering uncertainly between documentary and fiction). Inevitably, it has led a fugitive existence to date at festivals and special presentations.

Ruiz's other strategy, literalism, is perhaps a special form of parody and its use can be illustrated by reference to two very different works. In *Le Jeu de l'oie* (Snakes and Ladders), a short film made for a magazine programme, *Zig Zag,* and intended to publicise an exhibition on cartography

at the Centre Pompidou, Ruiz devised a 'didactic fiction'. His hero, (Pascal Bonitzer) leaves his car to meet two men at a table in the middle of a field, only to realise that he is the victim of a nightmare - 'the worst sort, a didactic nightmare', He discovers that he is a player in a monstrous game of Snakes and Ladders, not only a player but eventually the die, shaken by a gigantic pair of hands (shades of the *Thief of Bagdad).* As the dice are thrown and the players move from country to city, then from train to plane, the 'nightmare' gathers momentum. 'Everything becomes a map' and, in an apocalyptic finale worthy of Chesterton, 'the whole planet enters the game.'

This vastly entertaining and provocative film is a demonstration of Ruiz's notion of, as he puts it, 'making theory and object'. The conceptual issues implicit in the practice of cartography – the nature of the relationship between the map and what is mapped; how we learn to read maps; the distinction between maps, diagrams and pictures – all these are made *literal* in a fantasy which 'sets in play' the spectator's curiosity and imagination.

Another example of 'theory in practice' and Ruiz's parodistic literalism is the *Petit manuel d'histoire de France.* Commissioned by INA as part of a series of programmes using archive material (cf. the BBC's 'personal choice' format for sound archive programmes on radio), this proposes nothing less than a complete history of France, taking the numerous plays and dramatic series (such as *Enigmes d'histoire* and *Les Grandes batailles du passé)* as its raw material and faithfully following a consensus of school history primers. It is a work of pure collage, or photo-montage, and Ruiz makes minimal intervention in the extracts chosen – only a variable split screen to juxtapose contemporaneous images at certain times (baptism and execution on one occasion) and, in true television sporting/educational style he keeps tally of the date in the top corner of the screen. The resulting two part programme is both hilarious and instructive – less about French history (at least for a French audience), than about the conventions of that latter-day equivalent of the mediaeval chronicle, the historical drama. Rather than draw attention to the *absences* in French tele-history, to its (doubtless) evasions and distortions (as outlined in ch. 4 of Colin McArthur's *Television and History*), Ruiz massively reinforces its repetitions and stereotypes to the point of narrative excess and absurdity – as when he intercuts no less than four Jeanne d'Arcs, and when the same actors recur in characteristic roles throughout 'history', thus reducing even further the idea of 'great men' to a series of starring parts. By taking historical fiction as chronicle and exploiting its conventional ambiguity ('based on history'), Ruiz achieves a history as it is literally conceived by the popular French audience. Like a Martian, or a naive foreigner, he takes historical fiction at face value and cashes it in, with devastating effect. Another incidental effect is that an 'exceptional' television film, known abroad as a cinema film, Rossellini's *Prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV,* is here replaced in its original context.

It is of course an axiom of television studies that programmes and effects can only be understood *in* or *as* context; that individual segments cannot be considered in isolation from the 'flow' of which they are a part in the meta-discourse of scheduling. There is a consistent concern with the question of context running through all Ruiz's television work. The very fact of producing 'fiction' where 'documentary' is expected (and budgeted for)

in the cases of *L'Hypothèse* and *Le Jeu de l'oie* reflects on this most basic distinction that runs through all television. There is also clearly a subversive or disruptive aim behind works like the *Petit manuel* and the untransmitted documentary *De Grands évènements et des gens ordinaires.*

This last was originally commissioned as a personal view of the 1978 elections (see interview) — 'personal' as a balancing device within the regulation of television consensus. Again Ruiz interpreted his brief literally — and seriously. He dutifully embarked on an inquiry into the perception of the election and its effects in his own *quartier* of Paris, and from this compiled a film journal. But the process of the inquiry threw up its own questions about such interviews and what they reveal and conceal, how they are conducted and shot, and Ruiz includes these 'extraneous' elements as well. A round-table discussion (at *Cahiers du cinéma,* as it happens) about *cinéma-verité* and public opinion takes the mimetic form of a 360° pan, which then continues as a series of pans out into the streets. The narrator informs us that this sequence is structured differently from the others. A Latin American refugee reminds us of the example of Montesquieu and the *Lettres persannes;* another foreigner, a Canadian filmmaker, voices his frustration and scepticism about the whole process of documentary in advanced countries like France: 'it's easier to make documentaries in Third World countries because we are more powerful there.' In a few disconcerting minutes, Ruiz calls into question the whole ancestry of documentary, its implicit links with imperialism and a false political unanimity, and the irrelevance of the present film's delimitation of its subject. Disillusioned, the film leaves Paris behind and, against images of the Third World, looks forward to a documentary of the future which will 'show the poverty of those countries where joy and liberty still exist.' Literal to the letter, Ruiz wrote his original texts for the film in Spanish and had another Chilean exile sight-translate it for the film, with the inevitable hesitations and mistakes — a 'fictional' self-presentation of the filmmaker as refugee observer.

De Grands évènements is an extraordinary *tour de force,* one of the rare reflexive works in the cinema which develops an authentic discourse of its own, while managing to encapsulate both the history of documentary as a form and its present-day ubiquity and effectivity. Perhaps not surprisingly the film has yet to be transmitted by French television.

Underlying Ruiz's work of the last five years are a range of key ideas which can be traced to his involvement with a number of relatively 'marginal' French intellectuals. Rather than speak of 'influence', it is perhaps more a matter of correspondences and 'elective affinities', Of these ideas, the most important is the notion of the *stereotype,* already present in Ruiz's work in Chile, but reinforced by his encounters with Klossowski and Jean Baudrillard. Ruiz's friendship and collaboration with the art historian and theorist Jean-Louis Schefer has also led to an intensive study of theories of perception and the general history of 'representation', as conceived by theologians and philosophers. His engagement with these scholarly and speculative universes, however, is highly selective and, in a manner, pragmatic. From Klossowski, for instance, he takes the former's preoccupation with the *tableau vivant,* the representation which 'has a life of its own' and a reality as representation and links this with the proto-cinema of the waxworks to construct the iconography

of *L'Hypothèse.* Where Klossowski, a Catholic 'dissident' and translator of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, as well as an erotic novelist, sees the stereotype as the residue of the *simulacrum,* or essentially magical process of imaging, Ruiz interprets this as both an epistemological and a political process.

Where he had studied the emergence of social and political stereotypes in Chile before and during Popular Unity, he has continued this investigation on an historical and conceptual level, and has doubtless influenced in turn Schefer and Baudrillard, whose most recent work, *Simulacres et simulation,* includes the Ruizian observation: 'Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original — things are dubbed according to their own scenario'. With Schefer, Ruiz has developed a project for a film which would trace the progress of an image from the time of Piero della Francesca to the near future, when computer reconstitution of images will have developed sufficiently to make possible the simulation of the 'missing' elements that separate the Piero painting from a 19th century copy of it.

Exiled from his native language and culture, from the emergent Chilean cinema and, for the present, from the international art cinema, Ruiz has devised a *rhetoric,* or rather a play between rhetorics, which allows him to speak in terms recognisable to Europeans, without either wholly accepting their culture or betraying his own. Rhetoric is an impersonal speech, the product of a technical manipulation of discourse, and it is no doubt this awareness of rhetorical strategy that has allowed Ruiz to insert himself so successfully into the practice of television. In a video-tape made for the Beaubourg, *Debats,* (Debates), he has constructed a working model of that quintessential discourse of television, the discussion programme, in which a large cast of characters ('real' and real) debate a bewildering series of subjects with varying degrees of skill and conviction. In this Ruiz approaches the 'zero degree' of television, the point where its discourse appears least coded, but is actually most so. The debates become 'real' and it could easily be a television discussion programme, except that it is only seen in an art gallery or a cinema. This modest though interesting work recalls Ruiz's account of the paradox of intervention and political representation during Popular Unity:

> At this time everyone was reading books on the Soviet revolution, like *Ten Days that Shook the World,* which was regarded as a scenario for what was happening in Chile. People consulted it to see what stage we had reached and what was going to happen next; they also checked to see what part suited them best. It reminded me of Ernst Toller's *Youth in Germany,* where he describes how the workers' councils in Berlin in the 20s were like a *simulacrum.* He tells how intellectuals who had been to the Soviet Union would come and say, 'No it's not like that in the USSR, it was different'. They criticised the workers' movement as one might a theatre performance. In Chile it was the same, and not only among intellectuals. I made a documentary in the workers' districts and it was this quality of simulation that stood out: everyone was performing. *(Urgent Amérique Latine,* 1978).

Since there is no escape from representation, no direct access to reality, the way forward must be to raise the stakes and enlarge the scope of the game. After just completing a feature film, *The Territory,* Ruiz is also seeking more urgent and challenging ways of addressing the problems of simulation and stereotypic behaviour. But as the filmography shows, he continues to work in television, using it as a notebook and a laboratory for his continuing investigation of the relation between images and power.