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# Totally a Maze

BY AMY TAUBIN

**DOG'S DIALOGUE** and **THE HYPOTHESIS OF THE STOLEN PAINTING**. Written and directed by Raoul Ruiz. At Bleecker Street Cinema from November 13.

**D**og's *Dialogue* and *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, the manic/depressive double bill by the Chilean filmmaker Raoul Ruiz, will probably discourage more viewers than it converts. It's helpful to know therefore that the 30-odd films Ruiz has directed since this 10-year-old pair are far more delirious than dour.

Ruiz, who's lived in exile in France since Allende's fall, is both a fabulist and dialectician, and by now as alienated from the Third World as he is from Europe. Paradox is his *modus operandi* and *vivendi*—nothing in his formally avant-garde and politically leftist films is as astounding as the fact that the majority of them were produced under the auspices of television.

A staple on the festival and art theater circuit in Europe and Britain (he crossed the Channel on the wave of French theory that crested around 1980), Ruiz's language-heavy, virtually untranslatable films are a difficult sell in the U.S. His scripts collapse the lingo of underdevelopment into that of the intelligentsia. They have a schizoid instability and deranged perspective that can be alternately baffling, enervating, and hysterically funny.

The 18-minute *Dog's Dialogue* combines voice-over text and still photographs in a film version of a pulp *photo-romanza* [a comic-book form that substitutes photographs for drawings]. The hyperbolically vacant text that Ruiz claims to have lifted and abridged from a detective tabloid traffics exclusively in hopeless love, profound despair, and jealous revenge. Opening and closing with the disclosure of a child's illegitimacy, the Möbius-like structure twists on a sex-change operation through which Henri, formerly "happy in his job as a television repairman" but now a murderer against whom "the eternal laws of geometry have



**Wooden exercises: Academic meets arcane in Ruiz's decade-old mind-twisters.**

turned," is transformed into Odile, doomed to wander the streets of his/her childhood until he/she too meets a violent end at the hands of a sex-crazed lover. The sequences of stiffly posed, deadpan photographs are punctuated by occasional live-action shots of banal suburban landscapes (the scene of the crime in TV newstyles) and close-ups of furiously barking dogs (more flat-footed joke than operative metaphor).

If *Dog's Dialogue* discloses the emotional hook in prole entertainment even as it mocks it, the smart but deadly *Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* is far too respectful of, and consequently trapped by, the labyrinthine hermeneutics it purports to send up. A parody of television art documentary shot in wan but fluid black and white by Sacha Vierny (*Last Year at Marienbad*), it follows the attempts of a sepulchral-looking art critic to disinter the meaning of a series of 19th century paintings by recreating the tableaux vivants on which they were based. That the film is finally as wooden and unconvincing an exercise as the paintings themselves suggests an abundance of form/content ironies. On the other hand,

if I'm going to ponder, as Ruiz puts it, "the gap between our ideas about things and the things in themselves," I'd sooner the "thing" were not quite so academic. ■