

Metamorphosis. Approaches to cinema and the art of Raúl Ruiz

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In the early 90s, for our generation, the figure of Raúl Ruiz was that of a legend: a fascinating and prestigious filmmaker, the most talented of his time, living abroad, with a long list of films of which no one could see, or hardly any, except for some imagined works based on a few photograms, references in interviews, descriptions (mind you this was before the time of YouTube, Torrent and Netflix). I remember having rushed anxiously to see *Palomita blanca*, a film anachronistically released 20 years after its filming. During these years, Ruiz began to come back to Chile more often, where in fact he filmed what would be, years later *La telenovela errante*, posthumously released last year. At the end of that decade, we could see *El tiempo recobrado*, and after that *La comedia de la inocencia*, and around the same time read the first take of his *Poética del cine*, but Ruiz continued to be, to a certain degree, an unknown star, and urban legend for the initiated.

This all changed recently in 2002, when a broad and well attended retrospective of his work was held at the cine Hoyts theater: that event marked a milestone of his work in Chile among the generations born in dictatorship, an impact that perhaps we still do not fully understand. The

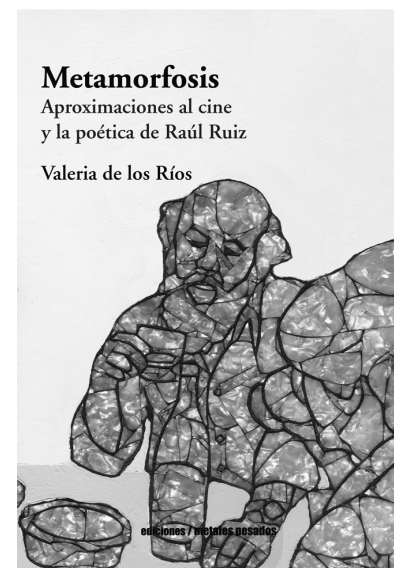
situation for he who wants to approach the work of Ruiz today is very different: something like half of his long works list is available on line, there is an archive dedicated to his work, his work has been subject to much debate and tributes, it is studied at universities and even in high schools, and there are numerous publications of critical studies dedicated to his work (in various languages), as well as a wide selection of his writings published posthumously.

Valeria de los Ríos is one of the people that has done more to disseminate, study, discuss and give access to the work of Ruiz. The book *El cine de Raúl Ruiz: fantasmas, simulacros y artificios* (2010), edited by her together with the critic Iván Pinto, was the first critic panorama in Chile of the filmic universe and imaginary, upon translating selections of his critical reception into French, Italian and English and add various new studies, together with the fundamental text on the functions of the shot and an excellent selection of images. It is an anthology that is still often referenced today and serves as a really good introduction to the art of Ruiz.

Valeria has not only written about Ruiz, but rather has an already considerable work that tracks the relations between texts and visualities. The book *Espec-tros de Luz. Tecnologías visuales en la literatura latinoamericana* (2011), made based on her doctoral thesis, is a pioneer essay on her exploration of dialogues, overlapping and common themes between literature, cinema and photography, and in her lucid reflection on the unnerving presence of the phantasmagoric, of

the spectral, in these technologies. In the book there is, that I remember, no mention of the cinema of Raúl Ruiz, but there is a lot on his obsessions. The ghosts, for sure, and the living dead, but also the maps, the simulations, the translation, the relation between cinema, image and magic that seems fundamental to me to understand an entire aspect of the Ruizian universe.

Valeria's previous book to this, co-authored by Catalina Donoso and dedicated to the work of Ignacio Agüero (*El cine de Ignacio Agüero*, 2015), intelligently and rigorously questions the diverse dimensions of the audiovisual image which Ruiz uses: the convergence of diverse media, the pensiveness of the fixed image, the various uses of voiceover, the visual exploration of space and the objects that populate it, the formal possibilities and narratives of the staging, the question for a policy of cinema that is not reduced to the recording of that represented in the image but which allows us to think of ourselves as a community of spectators whose dreams can be projected from the screen onto reality and transform it.



Metamorfosis possesses important virtues: its impressive ability to include theoretical and critical references that are very current and complex with great clarity and freedom, without getting bogged down in an opaque language to hide incomprehension, her descriptive rigor that never loses sight of the structure, materiality and mediality of the works discussed, but which at the same time, always seeing the forest while stopping at every tree. Like the good cook that she is, Valeria also knows how much of each ingredient to add: this book of apparently loose and free structure goes skillfully connecting the main themes of Ruiz's work and of his reception by critics.

The book, which collects and reviews various works by the author on Ruiz, is loosely structured around certain thematic and conceptual focal points: the introduction ("Espectros de Ruiz") addresses Ruiz survival in the present, all the while offering an outline of the total structure of the book, which begins by studying the struggle between representation and allegory in Ruiz's Chilean and French work, as poles linked respectively to the documentary movement and the exploration of the fantastic as an oblique way of representing reality (or recognizing that it cannot be done accurately). The following chapter focuses on the interesting conjunction between interest in material things and the question for that which is communal, followed by the discussion of the uses and abuses of Baroque as interpretative category for the cinema of Ruiz. The remaining chapters address, in the first place, the relationship between the story, memory, and diverse visual resources via which Ruiz examines them, in

particular the use of still images to question the limits of the cinematographic medium; secondly, the diverse configurations that the topic of childhood takes on in his work; and, finally, in the scars that exile left on him in regards to this work with diverse territories and cultural contexts.

Perhaps the best example of the virtues of this book is the chapter titled "Childhood and play", and in which, based on a consideration of the children that appear in the films by Ruiz, the author proposes a review of his theory as cinema as a toy that allows one to transit between different possible parallel worlds. This essay avoids the cliché of an innocent or naive childhood to explore its most disturbing dimensions, in the figure of the "bad boy", the misbehaved child that brakes the rules and who is not afraid of anything, nor the pirates nor death. The summary of this chapter, taken from the diary of Ruiz, is a phrase by Baudelaire: "Le génie est l'enfance à la commande" (the genius is childhood a pedido). In very *Ruizian*-style, it is a modified quote. The original goes like this:

A child sees everything as if it were a *novelty*; he's always drunk. Nothing seems more like the so-called inspiration that the joy with which a child senses shape and color. (...) The man de genio has steel nerves; a child's nerves are weak. In one, reason is quite developed; in the other, sensitivity affects almost its every move. For the genio it is not more than a voluntary *return to childhood*. (Baudelaire 56)

I do not know if Ruiz, famously erudite and at the same time irreverent with academic solemnity, changed the quote by mistake, ab-

sent mindedness, or purposefully (replacing the notion of will, that he hated, for that of "request" or "order", more linked to the field of restaurants of which he was quite a fan). It seems to me, that either way, the quote could work well both as a description of the work of Ruiz than as a description of this volume that studies it, and that conjugates the rigor with play, systematic with freedom, critique and the fascination of aesthetic bedazzlements.

These days, my most lucid interlocutor on many topics is my son Santiago, age 3.5. Recently, he declared all of a sudden, in a very serious tone, in response to my statement with the intention to calm me that ghosts do not exist, that "yes, ghosts exist in movies but not in the house". Another one of his favorite games is making me watch movies in which he plays a dinosaur, a gorilla, a robot that suddenly comes off the screen and scares the audience. Thus, I am afraid that soon he will discover what this book teaches about the *Ruizian* art: that ghosts do not exist at home, but the home is full of possible films, the house plays itself in a film in which we are the ghosts, and we play hiding in the dark in which our bodies can be whatever we want.

Reference

Baudelaire, Ch. "The Painter of Modern Life". Trad. de Alfonso Iommi y Bruno Cuneo. *Pensar & poetizar* n°1, verano 2001.: 49-86.

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