

A Mild-Mannered Maniac

Serious movies have as many rules and lazy conventions as summer blockbusters. But in a brilliant, prolific career, Raoul Ruiz has eluded them all. **By A.O. SCOTT**
Photograph by Gueorgui Pinkhassov

In the small bookstore of the Cinémathèque Française in Paris, a wall of shelves is devoted to works by and about the great auteurs — monographs, coffee-table tomes, DVDs. The pantheon of world cinema is too large for the available space, so the masters are arrayed in double rows, one behind the other. In order to browse, you must dig and rearrange, and on a recent visit, I felt a bit like a cinephile-archaeologist or a monomaniacal archivist as I burrowed past Ozu and Pasolini and displaced a row of Scorsese, making my determined way to Raoul Ruiz. I unearthed a small cache of movies directed by this Chilean-born filmmaker, who has made his home in Paris since the mid-1970s. I also found a book of interviews from the 1980s and another, “Poétique du Cinéma,” based on lectures he gave, mostly at American universities, over the years. The title of one lecture is “Cinema as Clandestine Voyage,” which might describe a curious viewer’s sometimes baffling but frequently enchanting journey through Ruiz’s films.

Discovering Raoul Ruiz is like stumbling into a secret room in an old, echoey mansion. You lean against a wall, your shoulder innocently trips a hidden mechanism and you find yourself whirled into a hidden chamber. Curios litter every surface, and the walls are lined with old volumes — uniform editions of the collected works of prolific authors whose names ring vague, perhaps imaginary bells. You





may recall a name from a college syllabus or a paperback you once saw on someone else's nightstand, but you had no idea there was such a diverse and enormous body of work.

Ruiz, who just turned 70, is the director, so far, of more than 100 films in several languages and also, in his spare time, a theater director and film theorist of some renown in Europe and beyond. He has taught at Harvard, adapted the last volume of Proust into a feature film, transformed several of Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales into a dark, surrealist comedy starring Marcello Mastroianni and made the life of the Viennese painter Gustav Klimt into a fractured biopic starring John Malkovich. His forays into North America have included the twisty psychological thriller "Shattered Image," starring William Baldwin and Anne Parillaud, and "The Golden Boat," a New York mock-policier with appearances by Jim Jarmusch, Kathy Acker and Annie Sprinkle.

"I have a mania for citation," Ruiz said to me on a recent morning, the day after my trip to the *cinémathèque*. We were drinking coffee in the unpretentious apartment, not far from the Père Lachaise cemetery, where he lives with his wife, Valéria Sarmiento, an editor and a filmmaker with whom Ruiz collaborates frequently. It was not the only time he described himself as a person who is subject to pathological obsessions. "Mania" was the answer he supplied to the obvious but irresistible question "How did you manage to make so many movies?" and also the explanation for the ancient leatherbound books crowding the shelves behind him. "These are my antidote to the Internet," he said, taking down a 17th-century French edition of memoirs attributed, in an elaborate and once-notorious hoax, to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius.

There is something old-fashioned about Ruiz — his literary enthusiasms, his compulsive collecting, the calm, amused tone in which he expresses these benign manias. And he seems to make films the way a 19th-century polymath might write, without the strain and anxiety that so often mark the modern creative temperament. His movies, though, are anything but antiquarian, even (or perhaps especially) when they are populated by costumed specters drawn from classic books. "Time Regained" is the perfect adaptation of Proust, because it feels less like a respectful homage to a venerable author than like a movie Proust himself might have made: Ruiz captures the essential Proustian experience of being simultaneously at odds with and at home in the present, aware of the perpetual slippage of past into future. And that may be a version of the essential Ruizian sensation. The world of his movies — as experienced by the characters and the audience alike — is at once soothingly, elegantly familiar and booby-trapped with surprises. There are sudden disappearances, long-buried secrets coming to light, supernatural happenings and bizarre coincidences. In his universe, improbability is the rule.

So it is no surprise that, in his conversation, surprises pop up frequently. He is soft-spoken — his impeccable French inflected with dry Spanish sonorities — and courteous, with a round, placid face that registers flashes of mirth and melancholy. Our conversation — dilating through the middle of the day, across a meal of roast pork, salad, fruit and cheese — was marked by a dizzying array of verbal annotations to postmodern philosophers and renegade biologists, to Filipino patriots and French publishing executives, all part of a flow of observation, speculation and anecdote. He recalled encountering legendary gangsters on the Brooklyn waterfront as a teenager traveling on a merchant ship captained by his father and, with the same amusement and wonder, a scene from an obscure old movie in which an aspiring composer played by Ricardo Montalban plays along with his own song on the radio.

Ruiz's latest film — or let's just say the next one American viewers will be able to see, since his oeuvre has a tendency to grow every time you reload his IMDb page — is based on the work of Camilo Castelo Branco, a 19th-century Portuguese author who seems to be, at least with respect to



High Art Ruiz on the set of "Mysteries of Lisbon," a four-and-a-half-hour, two-part adaptation of the sprawling novel by Camilo Castelo Branco.

industriousness and inventiveness, something of a kindred soul. Castelo Branco's collected writings, which cover nearly every conceivable genre, fill more than a hundred volumes, three of them consecrated to "Mysteries of Lisbon." A sprawling, digressive chronicle of the Lisbon aristocracy during the Portuguese civil wars of the 19th century, first published in serial form, the novel has been distilled by Ruiz and the Portuguese screenwriter Carlos Saboga into a four-and-a-half-hour, two-part tour de force. (It opens in New York and Los Angeles in August.) Framed by the classic founding's tale of Pedro, a poor orphan growing up in a boarding school, under the benevolent eye of a priest named Father Dinis, the film unfolds through a series of embedded plots and interlocking, rhyming episodes, linked by the fluid identities and complex fates of the characters and by themes of honor, kinship and desire.

The project came to Ruiz via the producer Paulo Branco (no relation to the novelist). "He proposed two things," Ruiz recalled: "Cosmopolis," Don DeLillo's slender novel of early-21st-century New York, and "Mysteries of Lisbon." In the ideal Ruizian *cinémathèque* (which would be Borges's metaphysically comprehensive Library of Babel reimagined as a Netflix queue), both the DeLillo and the Castelo Branco adaptations would exist, and the thousands of films Ruiz might have made would be just as real as the hundred-something he really has made.

For a while, it seemed as if "Mysteries of Lisbon" might be the last of those. Just as shooting was about to start, Ruiz learned that he had a cancerous tumor in his liver that appeared to be inoperable, a piece of news that he now describes wryly as "an unexpected factor" in the realization of the film. "It added a bit of drama, I guess," he said, "even though the shooting went very well. I was in a good humor, no problem, but sometimes at night. ..." He shrugged, as if to convey both the inexpressible gravity of the situation and its darkly comical aspect. These days he is in a "state of suspension" but good spirits. "Finally the doctors, tired of cutting my liver here and there, decided to cut the whole thing out and give me another one. And that may or may not work out, but for the moment it's working. I was in the hospital for three months, and I came out wanting to make movies." Since "Mysteries of Lisbon," he has completed one film based on the life of the French novelist Jean Giono (whose novel "Les Âmes Fortes" Ruiz adapted in 2001), and is currently researching another, suggested by the memoirs of some of Napoleon's generals, which he described as in the spirit of Castelo Branco.

It was, above all, the form of "Mysteries of Lisbon" — which belongs to the semidisreputable, hugely popular 19th-century serial genre called the *feuilleton*, a hybrid of gossip, melodrama and weird news — that appealed to Ruiz. "For a long time, I had been immersed in the world of the *feuilletons*,"

FEATURED FILM A. O. Scott narrates a clip of Raoul Ruiz's new film, "Mysteries of Lisbon," at nytimes.com/magazine.

he said. "Partly for reasons of personal taste but also for professional reasons. I've had a sort of Jekyll-and-Hyde career, doing avant-garde theater and also, when I was young, working on telenovelas for Mexican television.

"It's a system that eats everything, that devours everything," he said of the *feuilleton* aesthetic, a leading modern manifestation of which is the television soap opera. "As a young writer on the novelas, I would sneak in a passage from 'The Waste Land,' by T.S. Eliot, and everyone would be very pleased — 'Oh, yes, it's very moving!' — or Ezra Pound's 'Personas,' something like that — all kinds of jokes. But what was fascinating was discovering that if you try to manipulate the *feuilletons*, they end up manipulating you.

"What I could not do," he said of his approach to Castelo Branco's novel, "and what I think is the mistake many people make with this kind of material, is to mock it, to put it inside quotation marks." One striking aspect of Ruiz's adaptation is its sincerity. Another is a head-spinning superabundance of story dispensed in a manner that manages to be both decorous and frenzied. ("An acceptable level of delirium" is how Ruiz characterized it to me.) The narrative structure of "Mysteries of Lisbon" seems almost infinitely expandable; a six-hour version was shown on television in Europe.

The French pop-culture magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* praised Ruiz for avoiding the pitfalls of costume drama and compared the miniseries to "a 19th-century version of 'Lost.'" Because of its aristocratic setting and the grave formality of its characters' speech (even when what they are saying is utterly nuts), "Mysteries of Lisbon" looks at first glance like a stately, meticulous historical pageant. There are duels, fancy-dress balls, horses, hats, knee breeches and bodices, but for

all the highly mannered behavior on display, the overall mood is feverish, unruly and decidedly weird. The viewer is plunged into a world of hallucinatory strangeness — full of wild coincidence, seething emotion and elegant perversity — that also feels unnervingly contemporary.

"Not long ago, in the street, I ran into an editor I've known for years," Ruiz said. "A successful man, who knows something about money. And he said to me, 'I don't know if you agree, but it seems to me that France, or at least Paris, is becoming, sociologically, something out of Balzac.' Which is to say, not only the obsession with money but the instability of social relations." And that, he noted, is the great subject of the *feuilletons*, which turn, again and again, on reversals of fortune.

"We've recently seen one of those," Ruiz observed, alluding to fresh revelations in that morning's newspapers about *l'affaire D.S.K.*, an example of *feuilletonisme* brought to life on a grand scale. The day before, the prosecution's case began to wobble, and a second wave of tremors was rattling the media and political culture, and as we sipped a pre-lunch aperitif, Ruiz and Sarmiento pressed me for the latest news from New York.

"There is this idea of a liquid society," Ruiz said earlier, citing a concept from the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. "We buy things mainly to throw them in the garbage, or we throw them in the garbage in order to buy them. We live on credit, and that brings present-day society very close to Balzac — a world where nothing is concrete, where there is only speculation, only a game of mirrors."

Which more or less describes "Mysteries of Lisbon." Castelo Branco is sometimes called the Balzac of Portugal, but Ruiz himself is not exactly what you would call a realist. His film unfolds suavely, with a serene logic linking one scene to the next even as what happens in each scene often seems to defy logic altogether. The chronology lurches forward and backward, as Pedro unlocks the secret pasts of the people around him: his mother, an unhappily married countess; her lover and his family; Father Dinis, who also shows up as a bandit and a military officer. The only constant seems to be inconstancy, the waywardness of passion (which leads to adultery, betrayal and mortal jealousy) and, since every person seems to have multiple selves, of existence itself.

Even though his films are whimsical and culturally omnivorous, Ruiz does not play the highbrow-lowbrow game favored by younger filmmakers like Michel Gondry and Quentin Tarantino. They retain, for all their impishness, a sense of emotional gravity and aesthetic decorum that can feel bracingly old-fashioned.

His peculiar cosmopolitanism is partly the result of his background — his almost simultaneous discovery, as a child growing up in a small town in Chile, of Hollywood B-movies and classic European literature. "In Chile they used to say that the truly cultivated people were the ones without money, because they had to buy the cheapest books, which is to say the most interesting ones," he said. As an adolescent, he read Joyce, Ibsen and Pushkin in pirated editions purchased for a few pesos. His reading fed an imagination already shaped by an extended childhood encounter with the movies, vividly evoked in the first chapter of "Poétique du Cinéma": "There were two movie houses in our village: one showed Mexican films for grown-ups, Italian neorealist dramas and didactic French movies. The other specialized in American films for children. That was where we went, and even though there were some of us who occasionally went to the first theater in the hopes of seeing a naked woman, we far preferred the movies for kids. Even after we stopped being kids, we still liked those films better."

Those films were Flash Gordon serials, cowboy programs and bathing-beauty musicals starring Esther Williams. Though there were also masterworks by Howard Hawks and Fritz Lang, which Ruiz encountered, as his North American counterparts did, as entertainment rather than as art.

His memory of what he saw onscreen as a child is still vivid — he enthusiastically recounted a scene from the Al Jolson vehicle "The Singing Kid" in which Jolson and Cab Calloway sing a duet from terraces on neighboring skyscrapers — but he sees much of his work as radically opposed to the conventions of Hollywood storytelling. In particular, he rebels against the doctrine of the "central conflict," which turns every story into a battle between good guys and bad guys and imposes a tight narrative logic on everything. Ruiz has long maintained that every shot can be thought of as a film unto itself, a notion that emphasizes the essential discontinuity of our viewing experience. "Film is often considered something inert," he said, "as something that can be manipulated: you organize it; you cut it. Or else as a slice of life. It's either Hitchcock or Cassavetes," meaning either an all-controlling formalism or an open-ended absorption of real life. Ruiz's understanding belongs more to the tradition of the Surrealists, who saw in photography a dark fun-house mirror of the unconscious. "We forget that the cinematographic image exists by itself," Ruiz said. "The quantity of information that the image carries — against the will of whoever is trying to organize it — is enormous. And people say, Well, you have to eliminate that."

That surfeit of information — not just of visual detail but of emotional implication and psychic nuance — is precisely what Ruiz tries to cultivate. In his films, he creates an atmosphere of immediacy and disorientation, in which basic, usually unspoken distinctions — between foreground and background, exposition and action, naturalism and theatricality, the ordinary and the strange — are upended. You are perpetually startled, not so much by surprising events (these are routine) as by the vague but unmistakable sense that things look different, that something more complicated is happening than the passive act of looking.

"Cinema as Clandestine Voyage" opens with the conceit that, for most of their history, the movies have been "living among us, seducing us, watching us like extraterrestrials or gods, disappearing violently from one day to the next without giving us the time to comprehend what kind of machines or natural phenomena we were dealing with." In other words, it is in the nature of movies to be strange. At a time when they seem to have been so thoroughly domesticated and demystified, it is worth being reminded of this essential truth, and of the corollary that movies are strange because life is, too. That is why you go off in search of Raoul Ruiz, for whom the mysteries of cinema are also the facts of life. ♦