

Acropolis Cinema and
Laemmle present



June 7 - 13, 2019

Laemmle Music Hall ~ Glendale ~ Playhouse 7 ~ NoHo 7 ~
Monica Film Center

ABOUT THE FILM

Filmed by Chilean master Raúl Ruiz in 1990 but left unfinished until it was completed by his wife and collaborator Valeria Sarmiento in 2017, *The Wandering Soap Opera* is a dreamily interconnected series of vignettes that spoof on telenovela conventions while reflecting Ruiz's feelings upon returning to his native Chile after more than 15 years away. In one episode, a man seduces a woman by showing her his muscles, which are actually slabs of raw meat slapped into her hand. Later, the man has a gun pulled on him when he accuses a poet of plagiarism. Meanwhile, through the television screen, five women have lost their husbands after an earthquake and embrace a better future together. All along, back and forth across screens, people are watching.

Shot in gorgeous Super 16mm and featuring one zany performance after another from a cast having the time of their lives, *The Wandering Soap Opera* is a glorious sendup of the telenovela, which, at the end of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, Ruiz called the very best lens through which to understand "Chilean reality." (Cinema Guild)

80 min | Chile | 1990/2017

The Wandering Soap Opera **by James Lattimer**

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The first indication of *The Wandering Soap Opera's* unclassifiable nature is the fact that it can't even be pinned down to a single year. The film's closing credits are divided into two neat sections, separating those that worked on it in 1990 from those who worked on it in 2017, with the former section directed by Raúl Ruiz and the latter by his widow Valeria Sarmiento. Ruiz originally shot the film during a six-day filmmaking and acting workshop in Santiago in 1990, but the resulting 16mm footage was subsequent lost and languished at Duke University. Once rediscovered, Sarmiento edited the material based on Ruiz's original script, with the finished film premiering in Locarno this summer. Yet although its bipartite origins are not actually evident within the film itself, any sensible reading of it must still chart a suitable course between the now and the then, between the conflicting expectations linked to past curios and contemporary innovations, between the specifics of a historical situation and those elements which transcend it. This is a path as twisting as the one this film and its genre antecedent habitually take: it's not just this soap opera that wanders.

The workshop that gave birth to *The Wandering Soap Opera* is referenced in its central structure, which breaks the film down into six separate, consecutive chapters referred to as "days," which are bookended by short sequences of black-and-white photos and video footage showing Ruiz on set. Whether each of these chapters actually comprises the material shot on the respective day of the workshop is more or less irrelevant, as they largely function as independent units, never cohering into anything approaching a linear plot, even as certain characters, including a television fortune teller and a group of friends who form an impromptu clique at a bar, do occasionally reappear. Some chapters consist of a single scene, others segue between several, apparently unrelated occurrences, and yet others form themselves into loose narratives, albeit ones unburdened by the need to make conventional sense. A businessman and his lover thus conduct a flirt-

atious conversation until her husband arrives; two men help push a car on the street and bond because their names both begin with the letter B, before heading to a nearby bar that happens to be dedicated to all the others like them for a drink; a random meeting between two former university friends gives way to a mysterious meal conducted in darkness, where each new toast is stranger than the last; a ghost appears from nowhere, and no one emerges physically unscathed.

With the tone and genre of the individual scenes varying wildly between everyday incident, vivacious melodrama, deliberately tacky thriller tropes, and blank horror, other elements serve to mould them into a unified, if still baggy whole: a preternatural emphasis on orthography, dialectal variation, and homonymy; a tendency for dialogue to bounce back and forth hyper-redundantly between a restricted set of concepts; near-constant, often surreal interruptions and digressions; perpetual stabs of laugh-out-loud humor that draw on the oblique and the absurd in equal measure; frequent close-ups of faces or groups of faces, usually lit in anti-naturalistic high contrast. Yet the two most dominant recurring elements are Chile and the soap-opera format itself. The country and its geography, society, politics, economic systems, and culture are all referenced with such unflagging levels of detail and invention that many of said references are likely to be lost on non-Chilean and non-Spanish speaking viewers, whether the work of certain national poets, the amusing differences between the words used in different parts of Latin America, or the cities that traverse the entire length of Chile which come to describe a woman's body. At the same time, the characters constantly hold forth in deliciously self-reflexive fashion about the soap operas they watch, the soap operas they themselves act in or would like to act in, and their various names and characteristics, including the one that happens to be called *The Wandering Soap Opera*.

When describing his starting point for the film, Ruiz talked of working based on the assumption that Chilean reality is structured like an ensemble of soap operas, which the finished film renders a highly persuasive analogy. With the film being shot while Chile was still transitioning from the Pinochet dictatorship to a form of democracy yet to be determined, portraying the country's status quo via a genre entirely at ease with any number of twists and turns and sudden changes in mood and capable of concealing any amount of subversive content beneath its innocuous surfaces seems logical. Yet despite the film's cast being entirely composed of Chilean TV stars, this doesn't mean, however, that Ruiz is actually interested in making a soap opera himself, as the genre is treated as more of a structural template to be played around with than a direct model. Ruiz's own narrative shifts are so abrupt and so unmotivated that any seeming throughline soon fractures into abstract fragments, while certain references to the country are so unambiguous that they burst forth from the flow of dialogue rather than disappear within it, most prominently when a bishop expounds at length on the "rules" of torture. The pointedly redundant, circular quality of the dialogue functions as a form of political commentary itself, suggesting that after such a long period of collective muzzling, the very act of communication must now be renegotiated, with truly unrestricted opinion seemingly only able to be spoken out loud once the linguistic acrobatics of self-censorship have been cast off and new forms of expression have taken root.

Yet while the Ruizian "soap opera" certainly forms a fitting window onto the specific tensions of the Chilean transition, when viewed from the contemporary perspective its unique production history demands, the intricacy of its structure equally appears to anticipate and articulate the audiovisual viewing situation of today. The fourth day is perhaps the most representative example here. The previously mentioned television fortune teller is first shown sitting on a couch, conversing with a man standing next to her. He

joins her on the couch, whereupon the face of another woman then appears over them in superimposition, who comments laughingly on the pointed inauthenticity of the costumes, props, and set. The fortune teller then speaks directly to camera, declaring that the soap opera she's appearing in entails little more than watching other soap operas and commenting upon them. As their conversation resumes, it becomes clear that the two of them have themselves been watching television the entire time; a cut onto the television set reveals it's playing the same scene Ruiz is seen filming at the very start of the film. The conversation continues and when the camera cuts back to the television, a black-and-white melodrama is now on. Another cut brings the television screen closer, until a second one then makes it fill the entire frame, its colour changing in the process, with the melodrama continuing to play out until the chapter ends.

Both in this scene and in other moments throughout the film, images are layered on top of one another and pass seamlessly from one screen to the next, making their way through the different levels of fiction and only brushing against the real world tangentially, which itself only appears in mediated form. The impression created is that of an audiovisual hall of mirrors, where what is real and what is fake is impossible to determine and those watching and those being watched are one and the same; all a fitting evocation of the current era if ever there was one. Among all the "new" films to appear this year, it's hard to recall one that illustrates so compellingly how different sets of images flow into one another in 2017 as Ruiz's inadvertent media commentary from the '90s and from the grave (with the possible exception of Blake Williams' *Prototype*, which equally heads back into the past to do so). But then again, Ruiz was always a master of anticipation, as this line from his 1994 *Poetics of Cinema*, which could also double up as a synopsis for the film, once again proves: "What is new is the interaction of the stories and opinions of the audiovisual world with the everyday world—which is becoming more fragile every day. The boundary lines are vanishing. I don't just mean that we are guilty of complicity with any one aspect of the audiovisual world but that all of our 'I's' are fraternizing with the multiple 'they's' fashioned in the never-never land of the screen." ♦

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- Locarno in Los Angeles 2019—June 13-16 at LACMA and Laemmle Music Hall:
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AcropolisCinema@gmail.com

www.acropoliscinema.com