

# THE INFAMOUS LIVES OF ROEE ROSEN

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The Confessions of Roee Rosen

"Roee Rosen": one by one, three women proclaim themselves the bearers of this masculine name. From behind a desk in a small bedroom, they venture so far as to tell their life story—his life. Occasionally they rise to perform delirious gesticulations: raising their arms to the heavens, flinging an arm out in a Nazi salute, nodding their heads in approval or disapproval. Speaking in a tongue that escapes his understanding, a child explains to us that he is a puppet executing the orders of a manipulator. He seems to rejoice in the thought. Strange paintings, with ornamental motifs, portraits, and lugubrious scenes, adorn the walls of all the sets. Musical interludes regularly punctuate the sequences. Someone sings a melancholy Russian air, backed by an accordion and a musical saw, interpretations of Chopin, a quartet plays an excerpt from a baroque opera, a folk hymn, a Yiddish song, or The Stooges' "I Wanna Be Your Dog." Two S&M adepts hailing respectively from the political far right and the left confide their political inclinations to the camera. An exorcism expels the voice of an Israeli minister emigrated from Moldavia. A television host monkeys around making silly faces, while telling one sick joke after another for the pleasure of an audience that laughs and applauds on command. A

stuffy art critic sporting a rather strict hairdo comments on the work of an unjustly overlooked Belgian surrealist artist. And the list goes on.

These are, all too briefly, just some of the situations, setups, and sketch intros that could be brought together in an eventual trailer for the filmography of Roee Rosen. It's easy enough to grasp the singular nature of the matter at hand, and yet the man boasts few films to his name for the time being, not to mention the fact that he doesn't even present himself as a filmmaker. He admits, instead, to being an artist, and regularly exhibits a body of work rather traditional in appearance in places commonly perceived as art venues. All the paintings and drawings that decorate the walls in his films are his doing. Lest it be overlooked, he is also the author of a rather grating illustrated children's book, as well as a pornographic novel titled *Sweet Sweat*. Written in English and published with a critical arsenal so rigorous that one can't help but discern a methodical parodic streak underlying the work, it scrupulously apes the erudite publications and their way of assigning roles and places: the preface and preface author, the original text, a critical afterword, biographical and bibliographical notes, etc. The ensemble is thrown into doubt by questions of

attribution touching upon the figure of the author, who Roe Rosen seems to have chosen as one of his privileged *bêtes noires* in order to confront us with that renowned riddle, "What belongs to whom?"

A particularly agile artist operating his irony as much on the framework as on the contents of the frame, it is hardly surprising that he tries his hand at film. Yet even there, nothing can be taken at face value. If film is employed as an obvious choice for its dramatic impact and ease of diffusion, it is simultaneously questioned as a "format," much like his novel, which obeys the rules of the genre with refined calculation to implode its constructs and generate infinite regressions. He thus quotes certain genres, alternating, for example, between the documentary and the musical, while unabashedly exploiting film's distribution regimes: the trailer (*Confessions Coming Soon*, 2007); the bonus bloopers in DVD editions (*Gagging During Confessions: Names and Arms*, 2008); music clips (*I Was Called Kuny-Lemel*, 2007); as well as the talk show (*Dr Cross, A Dialogue*, 1994; *Two Women and a Man*, 2005; *Hilarious*, 2010). Coming to public attention in 2005 at the Oberhausen and FIDMarseille festivals (prior to wider festival circulation) and the Orizontti prizewinner at Venice for his latest work, *Tse (Out)*, 2010, Roe Rosen has rapidly imposed himself as one of recent filmmaking's most audacious, provocative, and complex characters.

What is this complexity based on? Let's just say it has something to do with a strategy that operates like a trap. Everything in Rosen's body of work is at the very least triple-bottomed: no image, word, or sound appears to be what it seems. None of the tools that film uses to produce authenticity are left intact, but rather used against themselves as fruitful resources to produce shams and *trompe l'oeils*. While the naturalistic regime predominates in the form of the documentary and especially in the interview, this regime is used precisely to frustrate expectations in the most outrageous ways. We know that the interview is obviously based on interrogation—or, in other words, the confession—which implies that the law of absolute identification be applied. The person we see speaking assures us that he does so in his name, and whether he lies or tells the truth makes no difference, be it in the context of a man-on-the-street or studio interview. He verifies his identity, his name, first, as well as the exact correspondence between his face and his words. The interview is this scene where one plays at being oneself, constantly confirming, performing, and swearing to being one's self, using the speech act to accomplish one-to-one identity.

Roe Rosen lays this rule to waste. For example, in *The Confessions of Roe Rosen*, a woman tells her life story. She does so in accordance with the rules of the genre, facing the camera. But the life she is telling is obviously that of a man. Moreover, she doesn't understand a word she says because she's reading a text in Hebrew off a teleprompter transliterated into Roman characters. Even worse, two other women continue this speech in the first person using the same device. Well? Well, it turns out these three women of various ages, complexions, and geographical origins are illegal migrant workers in Israel. Their different ages, complexions, and geographical origins represent three continents: Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. They've been paid by Roe Rosen to do this

job. This then is the autobiography of an Israeli male artist taken to the test: split in three, borne by the fairer sex, by bodies under contractual obligation, by awkward voices, by faces whose mouths pronounce gibberish for the ears. What the title of the confession announces is thus broken down, blurred, prevented, deprived of its creator's signature. "Roe Rosen" dissolves himself. The end of the film testifies to this without the slightest ambiguity, through a succession of shots showing materials in fusion whose nature confounds: is it paint, shit, sperm, piss, or glue? Coloured magmas that seem to hail from an old alchemical recipe saturate the screen.

Despite this unending, overwhelmingly bottomless confusion, one should, without going into further details, take note of three things.

1. Certain parts of the text could concern these three women; that's to say they might have something in common with "Roe Rosen." And that is precisely where the paradoxical meaning of the confession lies: to speak only of oneself while at the same time attaining the level of universal exemplarity. In other words, while Roe Rosen the filmmaker questions the highly profitable artifice of proclaimed authenticity touted by the "autobiographical pact" (to use Philippe Lejeune's expression), he activates potential cross-references, possibilities for shared solidarities. However, these solidarities occur always by default, as unconscious brotherhoods and/or sisterhoods, since most of the time they are the outcome of oppression. What's more, these solidarities remain hypothetical, nothing more than the unverifiable projection of the spectator's gaze.

2. By pronouncing the text with great difficulty, these three women commit pronunciation errors that totally alter the original meaning. In other words, they act upon the monologue to ruin it and at the same time re-appropriate it accidentally. However unaware they remain, their interpretation becomes nonetheless unique, singular, stamped each time around with their respective signatures. "The rotten corpses" becomes "the rotting cheese" or "tears of terror" changes into "tears of a mother." As a result, their scrupulous obedience to the written text does not prevent something "belonging" (if this word fits, and of course it does not, since this is the very word that is challenged) to them—their origin, their poor grasp of the language, weariness, slips, in a word their intimate being—from subverting this same obedience through its effects.

3. If their words are whispered to them by another, in the name of another, and escape their comprehension, the physical ordeal of executing this paid task and of inscribing oneself in this contract of pure violence is perfectly visible. Nothing escapes unscathed, and the effect becomes more pronounced as we go from one speaker to the next. The effort, the embarrassment, or even the angst is easily read on their faces, in their gestures, their elocution, the way they carry themselves, as if the teleprompter was now facing us. Expelled from the territory of the word, their bodies testify to their exploitation, less ideally than through words. It is in fact the body that nourishes the openly documentary part of this film cum filmed autobiography. This happens in two ways: through its forced silence upon which an unknown language and sentences other than their own are superimposed and through the thankless labour to which it is submitted without reprieve.



Tse

To top things off and complicate any attempt at an all-encompassing vision, it must be specified that the Roe Rosen Ensemble, the group of young Israeli female musicians that perform the musical interludes in *The Confessions of Roe Rosen*, adapts songs originally written in English into Hebrew, from Purcell to Iggy Pop, via a gospel number; expropriation on one hand, re-appropriation on the other.

Hence the frequent recurrence of cross-dressing and ventriloquism. Hence also the fact that these operations of exorcism and possession are almost systematically made to resonate with the presence of music performed live. In this way Roe Rosen communicates his interest in artifice, the replica and what might be summed up, in all the meanings of the word, as *interpretation*. This penchant for the baroque multiplication of appearances, to the detriment of the original which remains always either dubious or absent, doesn't stop at endangering and exploiting identity to the limits of the logic of representation. It engages the register of comedy with a political scope. A similar mixture of genres and the musical with the aim of corrosive distancing and comic political allegory can be found in Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002) or in most of Avi Mograbi's films, though especially *Z 32* (2008), to mention only filmmakers hailing from the same territory.

What sets Rosen apart is that the comic goes beyond being just a solid dramaturgical tool, becoming in itself the terrain for ambivalent experimentation. The carnival logic activated through the grotesque, black humour, and the deadpan and sleazy jokes doesn't stop at reversing situations or values, according to Bakhtin's renowned analysis, but throws them into a turmoil that escapes solid rational thought. Rosen's mixing of sex and politics has nothing to do with the application of old Reichian precepts, but implies accepting the unconditional extension of his political approach. It's obvi-

ously no coincidence then that the final scene of *Tse* explicitly quotes Dusan Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971), but if it does, it's to complicate things further rather than wrap things up neatly. To put it differently, we could say it's to substitute the sadistic logic of irony with one that oscillates between irony (sadistic mastery) and humour (masochistic dispossession), according to the distinction proposed by Deleuze in his preface to Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*. It's also in this light that we should understand the almost exclusive presence of women or cross-dressers in his films. Even the simple effects of casting concur with the refusal to inscribe oneself in the position of the master. This doesn't mean that the women escape this position, for parallels are indeed established between the young musicians of the Roe Rosen Ensemble in *The Confessions* or the dominatrix in *Tse* and their possessed sisters, but even then, mastery is incomplete. The musicians, whose name quite explicitly indicates that their independence is impossible, obey the partition and end with Iggy Pop's masochist hymn. In *Tse*, the young mistress of decidedly masculine allure clearly explains that she is at the service of the one she's beating and attempting to exorcise.

Who, then, is "Roe Rosen?" Both Doctor Mabuse and Rupert Pupkin, Gepetto and Pinocchio, St. Augustine and Seinfeld, a young woman singing of her joy to die and a Russian of his lost loves, a white dog and a red-faced demon, a saint and a pervert, a Dadaist and a surrealist, both the state of Israel and a clandestine migrant cleaning lady. Far from being exhaustive, this list suggests a logic of superimpositions rather than an additive one, where each new character enters into a dialogue with the others to map out a complex self-portrait in motion of a filmmaker who has chosen to don the harlequin costume of infamy. ■