

A Hunchbacked Dwarf, a Cross-Eyed Angel, a Woman-Monkey, and a Shit Boy

Joshua Simon

Evening. A man is sitting in a neighborhood bar. The television is on. A weekly talk show flickers on the screen. This time, however, it has a guest host: an anxious and decidedly unfunny man. His monologue is broken and embarrassing, and he appears to be deranged. This man is Rupert Pupkin, the protagonist of Martin Scorsese's film *The King of Comedy* (1982). Were we not familiar with the background of Pupkin's TV appearance—his difficulties and madness, as well as the obsessive and violent aspects of his behavior—his performance would remain an inexplicable episode.

In Roe Rosen's film *Hilarious*, a mad comedian (Hani Furstenberg) bursts onto the stage in a talk-show studio. She grimaces, hops about like a monkey, spews racist or merely tasteless jokes, and ends with the announcement that she is about to die. At first glance, this film—which features an embarrassing, pointless, and vulgar stand-up gig, a portrait of a disturbed individual—stands out in the context of Roe Rosen's oeuvre. Although *Hilarious* is loaded with explosive combinations of racism and anti-Semitism, sex and death—subjects that Rosen is regularly concerned with—it does not seem to relate to a meta-conceptual context in the manner typical of his other works. And while the film's presentation of itself and its underlying logic as a format complete with its own internal contradictions is a strategy regularly employed by Rosen, in this case there seems to be no background plot to guide or misguide us through it.

The film *Hilarious* seems to reflect on its own format—the opening monologue of a talk show—while debating and bashing it. Attention to the format of the works and a playful engagement with it underlies all of Rosen's projects; in some paintings, Rosen even depicts the painterly support itself (such as the yellowish-brown strips of plywood in the series "Lavie Suite" [2000]). Yet unlike Scorsese's film, the story of the comedian

in *Hilarious* contains no plot. At the same time, it is delivered with no conceptual or historical reference points, as is the case in other projects by Rosen.

Rosen's projects always have an internal, self-referential dimension, which is evident in the early large-scale series of paintings ("Martyr Paintings" pp. 62–73, the "Professionals" pp. 74–79, and the later, continuous series ("Funerals," pp. 178–189); the projects based on fictitious figures; the video works based on a range of painterly, theoretical, and literary bodies of work (Justine Frank, Maxim Komar-Myshkin); the projects that breathe life into historical and literary figures (Eva Braun, the blind merchant based on Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*). This is also true of his film *The Confessions of Roe Rosen* (2010, the short version created with his son Hillel, as well as the long version), which presents a trio of foreign female works reading a forced confession in a language they do not speak, and even of *Out*, which documents a BDSM/exorcism scene whose text consists entirely of published quotes by the right-wing Israeli politician Avigdor Lieberman. This self-reflexive dimension operates within the work by means of a parasitical engagement with a classical text by Shakespeare; the Legends of the Saints; the story of Eva Braun and Hitler's suicide in a Berlin bunker; the fictitious biography of Efim Poplavsky (aka Maxim Komar-Myshkin), a young Russian artist who died in Israel; the invented biography of the Jewish-Belgian artist Justine Frank; and the confessions of St. Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In this sense, the speculative frequency of Rosen's oeuvre—painterly and literary works allegedly produced by figures with invented biographies—serves in fact as a form of counter-speculation. His interest is not in establishing the creativity of an artist and in bolstering his chances of market success (this is the logic of the artist who himself constitutes a



gallery capable of offering several types of artists)—a strategy that has become widespread following the contemporary shift to speculation—but rather in the creation of a counter-biography that subverts a familiar historical trajectory, as traumatic as it may be. So, for instance, when Rosen engages with the history of the Surrealist movement, whose members were French, Catholic men, he does so through the figure of a Jewish-Belgian woman artist; his engagement with the figure of Hitler takes place through the eyes of Eva Braun; and the axis tying together the tsar, Stalin, and Putin, which is shaped by a Russian tradition of authoritarian rule, is examined from the perspective of a young émigré suffering paranoid delusions. In this manner, Rosen activates a form of counter-speculation, as he articulates the conditions out of the artwork’s making. The meta-text in Rosen’s works serves as the background to the work by means

of its own negation. For even if the works can be experienced without this background, they demand to be read in relation to a body of pre-existing knowledge and to a certain context. They always point to the presence of a parallel, earlier conversation taking place under a different set of circumstances, among people who lived and acted in another reality—a conversation distinct from our own selfhood, understanding, and individual form of expression. Call it ideology, trauma, the unconscious, genealogy, spectres, debt, history, or theology (the same theology embodied by the hunchbacked dwarf, the chess master described by Walter Benjamin at the opening of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” who sits hidden inside the famous chess automaton known as the Mechanical Turk. This automaton, which always wins, is likened to historical materialism, which relies on the theological dwarf).¹ The artwork we face always emerges out of a

Left to right:
Shit Boy Showers (A Suicide), *A Grave Here*, *Edible Philippine Workers*,
 2007, signpost, dimensions variable (graphic design by Kerem Halbrecht)



world rife with contradictions and absurdities, and exists in relation to it and to various other worlds, to its own logic and to the numerous other logics it carries with it, and with which it is in conflict.

According to Louis Althusser, the abstractions of psychoanalysis are the really authentic concepts of its object of study—the unconscious. As Althusser argues, psychoanalysis' conception of its object of study involves the index, measure, abstraction, and figuration of the concrete relations existing within its object of study.² In this sense, psychoanalysis constitutes a sort of meta-text of the unconscious. Every project created by Rosen includes a mechanism of this kind; even if it is not accessible to us, it functions as a framework or organizing idea that underlies the relations given expression in the work. What is revealed is the soul in all of its complexities. What remains concealed and persistent is the mechanism for its description.

If we take an innocent-looking painting such as *Shit Boy Showers (A Suicide)* (2007), we can see how Rosen paints the mechanism that undermines its own existence. Depicted in the graphic language of a cheerful illustration, the figure—a brown, naked creature resembling a smiley ghost, which hovers against a pinkish-blue background like that of the sky at dawn—appears child-friendly. The shit boy naughtily sprays his urine above his own head. This personification of shit and the trap into which the shit child falls—the cycle of construction and destruction, the options that leave us with no choice, the use of urine to wash the excrement, the cheerful smile, and impending death—offer a poignant allegory of our state of being.

Kaja Silverman coined the term “anal capitalism” to describe the flow of commodities into garbage under late capitalism and the structured cannibalization underlying our relations with the world.³ The inevitable, closed-circuit loop that brings about the end (the suicidal dimension of the shit boy's shower) gives expression to a reality in which we are held hostage by a logic we cannot undo. In the spirit of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” this child could be our *Angelus Novus*. If, according to Benjamin, Paul Klee's angel has its face turned back towards the past—to the “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet”—then Roee Rosen's seemingly innocent painting *Shit Boy Showers (A Suicide)* similarly calls for an allegorical reading, according to which the current historical moment is a shit boy in the course of showering. All we can hope for is that the system which is impoverishing us will continue its course. Our creativity will not save us, but will merely serve to feed this same exploitative beast. We have nothing except for our own chains.

One could argue that every artwork contains its own built-in internal language and logic, which it both contradicts and conceals. Yet the disturbing power of Rosen's works requires us to adjust our orientation concerning our own position, our perspective as

מימין לשמאל:

פיליפינים אכילים, קבר כאן, ילד קאקי מתקלח (התאבדות), 2007, שלט חוצות (עיצוב: כרם הלברכט), מידות משתנות

viewers, and our own narrative voices as we engage with them. Examples of this strategy include the use of actual architectural sections in certain paintings (such as “Live and Die as Eva Braun”); plans seen from a bird’s-eye view (for instance, in the series “Martyr Paintings”); descriptions of systems (such as the sewage system that rises up to hover in mid-air in *The Confessions of Roe Rosen*, or the walled city in the novel *Ziona™* [2006]). The system underlying the City of God, the steps leading down to the bunker, the sewage system and the walled city are maps that reveal the work’s mental orientation; a self-imprisoned symmetrical city, a landscape which contains parallel and contradictory levels of activity, an underground system overloaded with bodily excretions that turns figurative and weightless, a form of frantic, manic-depressive activity that leads nowhere.

We have seemingly liberated ourselves from the developmental model of the artist’s figure established by Giorgio Vasari some five-hundred years ago, as well as from the approach defined by Ernst Cassirer, Erwin Panofsky, and others, which viewed art as a symbolic language. At present, artists work simultaneously in a range of mediums such as performance, installation, video, photography, painting, drawing, sculpture, writing, and music, so that today every retrospective exhibition resembles a group exhibition. Yet in contrast to the dilettante code followed by contemporary artists, Rosen’s wide-ranging investment in different mediums is carefully directed.

His projects are embedded in the worlds of writing, cinema, and painting; they all involve articulations of figurative strategies, depicting mainly individual and group portraits. In this context, one can understand his engagement with the literary genres of pornography (*Sweet Sweat—Justine Frank*), science fiction (*Ziona™*), and children’s literature (*A Different Face* [2000], *Lucy*); the first two genres demand extensive descriptions, while the third is both textual and graphic. At the same time, each project is also invested with an archeological charge—such as the exegetical notes

accompanying the book *Sweet Sweat—Justine Frank* and the album *Maxim Komar-Myshkin—Vladimir’s Night*, which appear as part of each work. Once again, one can refer to the logic of the retrospective as a contemporary group exhibition, since Rosen’s unique group of multiple figures immediately relates to this logic. Moreover, the numerous mechanisms produced by each work, their interrelations, and the manner in which the archeological meta-text confronts them with each other reveal another, or perhaps other, dimension of the “group” logic, which branches out in different directions. One such affinity between different archaeologies, a sort of “double date” that Rosen is most certainly aware of, is that between Rosen’s wife (in the role of Justine Frank) and the Nazi leader’s lover (Eva Braun, who offers us her intimate perspective on Hitler), which forges an ambivalent connection between Hitler and the artist. Another affinity, which concerns the mechanism of performance (in painting and in speech), is evident in the relations between the early work *The Blind Merchant* and the work *The Confessions of Roe Rosen*, which was created two years later. *The Blind Merchant* presents the full text of *The Merchant of Venice* with illustrations by Rosen and a background narrative written by the artist from Shylock’s vantage point. Every time Shylock speaks in the play, the accompanying illustrations are “blind” (that is, drawn by Rosen with closed eyes). In the film *The Confessions of Roe Rosen*, the mechanism resembles that of reading: foreign female workers living in Israel perform a “blind reading” in a language they do not understand (Hebrew). They communicate to the camera—and by extension to the viewers, the artist’s fantasies and fears, delivering this narrative text they do not understand as if each of them were Roe Rosen. The puppeteer-artist who seemingly controls everything and activates the women in the film appears in a very different light, however, when one recognizes the affinity between the mechanism of blindness in this film and that shaping the earlier drawings of his own making.

The form of speech characteristic of Rosen's films—ranging from *Hilarious* to the historical jokes read by the hostages held by Maxim Komar-Myshkin and the other members of the “Buried Alive” group—is direct speech. The text spoken in the work *Out* is a quote from Avigdor Lieberman; *The confessions of Roe Rosen* presents a fantasy of Rosen's transmitted by women speaking in the first person, and his historical jokes are similarly read from a page, as if under coercion.

From what position, then, does the female comedian in *Hilarious* speak to us?

This film presents us with the archeology of its own making—the anachronistic reality within which we are positioned as viewers is both its context and its subject. One cannot simply move on as if what is at stake here were merely a Pupkin-style failure, appearing before our eyes without a story. Ideology, trauma, the unconscious, ghosts, debt, history—all these appear in the image of that dying woman-monkey—Roe Rosen's version of history's hunchbacked dwarf of theology.

Notes

- 1 See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 253–264.
- 2 See L. Althusser, “Freud and Lacan,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 215.
- 3 See K. Silverman and H. Farocki, *Speaking about Godard* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 83–111.