



THE POLITICAL, THE PRIVATE AND THE EROTIC



ROEE ROSEN AND HILA PELEG
IN CONVERSATION

Roee Rosen—a painter, novelist, and filmmaker—is an astute critical voice in Israel. While his work deals primarily with representations of desire and structural violence, Rosen has created an artistic universe that treacherously undermines the normative implications of identities and identifications through fictionalization, irony, and inversion.

Rosen's film, *The Dust Channel* (2016), is an operetta with a Russian libretto set in the domestic environment of a bourgeois Israeli family, whose fear of dirt, dust, or any alien presence in their home takes the shape of a perverted devotion to home-cleaning appliances.

HILA PELEG
In your new film, *The Dust Channel*, the central protagonist is a Dyson DC07 vacuum cleaner. Why the urgency to tell a story about a home-cleaning device?



ROEE ROSEN
The original poem, which ended up serving as a libretto, was written several years ago, supposedly by the fictive ex-Russian émigré Maxim Komar-Myshkin. In Komar-Myshkin's last and greatest work before he committed suicide, objects—among them several home appliances—come to life so as to torture and kill Vladimir Putin.

The second part of the book, which you might call “a novel in annotations,” collects some of his earlier writings, including exercises in such animistic magic chants that tell objects their own history. This echoes Tretyakov's famous call, in the 1920s, to write on objects rather than subjects, so as to expose class relations that are otherwise programmatically suppressed in fiction. Obviously this is a perverted realization, as Komar-Myshkin's objects tell several histories, wherein the social agenda is neither clear nor stable, and the emphasis invariably mixes the political with the private and erotic.

The story of Dyson, the ingenious inventor, includes not only hyperbolic self-aggrandizement, but also a hefty sprinkling of xenophobic statements—for example, a Southeast Asian student planting bugs in “our” British computers. The poem emphasizes the striking feature of Dyson's machines: their transparent belly that allows you to stare at the dirt and enjoy its fascination even as you clean. The poem calls it “The Grime Channel.”

This blend of domestic obsessions and desires spawned by dirt and cleanliness and the invasive power of dust make me think of human invasion—namely refugees—and to relate this British-Russian hybrid to the reality of present-day xenophobia and its particular political format in Israel. As for the urgency of telling that story, it is paradoxically the seemingly non-urgent mode of registering privilege, fantasy, seduction, playfulness, consumption, and leisure that underscores political strife.

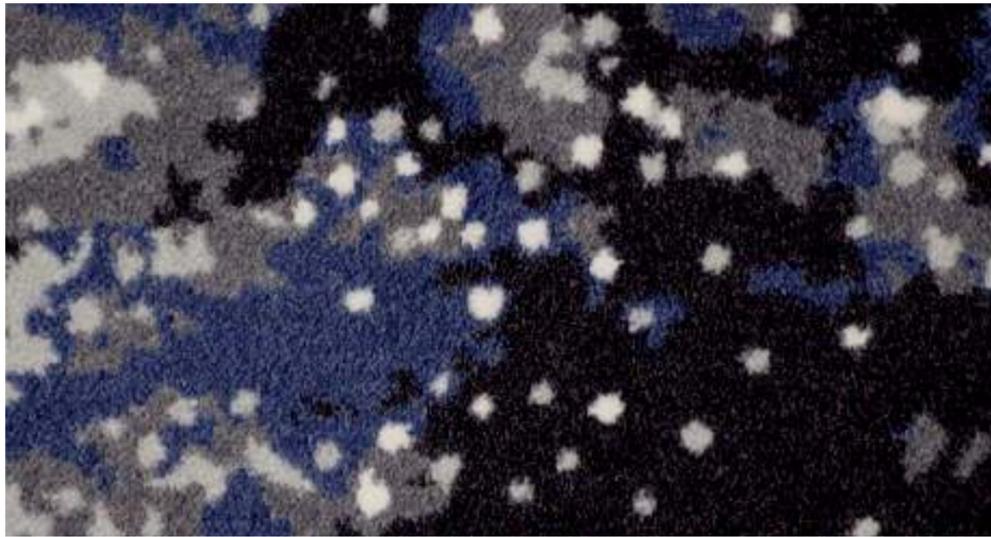
HP Invasion, occupation, and dislocation take several forms in *The Dust Channel*. Can you describe the film's plot?

RR The film presents a young couple who reside in a luxurious villa. Their strong feelings and, indeed, passion for their DC07 vacuum cleaner are shared by some of the large staff of cleaners and servants, in particular the housemaid (played by the cellist). Signs of the danger of invasion begin early on. When the man opens the window, we see the desolate Negev desert and the barbed fences of the Holot detention center. Soon after, one of the maids (the flutist) smuggles in an invader (the violinist), who hides in the laundry room, while his aide, whose face grows darker and dirtier as she plays, hides in the bathtub. Policemen (the cembalo and clarinet players) enter the house in search of infiltrators. While this is going on, the camera zooms in on DC07's transparent belly (referred to in the libretto as “The Grime Channel”), operating as a news channel and providing a brief summary of the Israeli government's aggressive measures in dealing with asylum seekers. The officers discover some infiltrators and remove them; nonetheless, everyone ends up festively playing the finale of the score in the bedroom. But DC07, an insomniac, rises up and roams the living room, flipping channels and airing what seems to be the program of a cable provider targeting an audience of vacuum cleaners.

HP *The Dust Channel* is an operetta in Russian, with music by Igor Krutogolov. What is the significance of the Russian language and culture in your recent work?



All images - *The Dust Channel* (stills), 2016.
Courtesy: the artist





Hila Peleg is curator of documenta 14, Athens / Kassel, 2017. She is the founder and artistic director of the Berlin Documentary Forum, a biennial event initiated at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2010 devoted to the production and presentation of contemporary and historical documentary practices in an interdisciplinary context. Peleg has curated solo shows, large-scale group exhibitions, and interdisciplinary cultural events in public institutions across Europe, including KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; Extra City Kunsthall, Antwerp; Iniva, London; and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. Peleg was curator of Manifesta 7 (Trentino- Alto Adige/Südtirol, 2008), and curator of the film program at the 10th Shanghai Biennale (2014). Her films *A Crime Against Art* (2007) and *Sign Space* (2015) were screened in many festivals worldwide, including Berlinale, Hot Docs, FID Marseille and CPH:DOX, and presented at institutions such as Centre Pompidou, New Museum, Tate Modern, and ZKM. Peleg is the editor of the book *Documentary Across Disciplines* (The MIT Press, 2015). Peleg studied photography and video at the University of Westminster, London, and art history at Goldsmiths College, London.

Roe Rosen (1963) is an artist, a filmmaker and writer. His films include *Out* (2010), which won the Orizzonti awards for best medium length film at the Venice Film Festival. His latest book is entitled *Live and Die as Eva Braun and Other Intimate Stories* (Sternberg Press, 2017). His art is featured this year in documenta 14. Rosen is a professor at Ha'Midrasha Art College, and at the Bezalel Art Academy, both in Israel.

RR Since the dissolution of the USSR, more than a million post-Soviet Jews have immigrated to Israel, profoundly changing the country and indeed the Middle East. In 2010, I made a film about an ultra-right-wing politician, Avigdor Lieberman (presently the Defense Minister), who emigrated from Moldova. The research involved reading texts in Russian, as I assumed he would address his fellow expatriates differently from native Israelis. This drew my attention to the ways in which Soviet forms of power metamorphosed under neoliberal conditions (which later led me from Lieberman to Putin).

I was also fascinated with my colleagues, some of them my ex-students, and wanted to channel their sense of displacement and irony as immigrants, through my own sensibilities. This in turn led to the invention of Komar-Myshkin and his collective, the Buried Alive (with Igor, the composer, becoming a bona-fide member of this fictive collective and writing all of its music). Studying Russian for the project was a significant step, but I never really intended to master the language. Instead, I thought it could be interesting to parody my scholarly self by assuming the position of a Russian writer without knowing the language.

In a way, it was to reverse the division of labor in my film *The Confessions of Roe Rosen* (2008), where labor migrants speak Hebrew without knowing what they say. In retrospect, I can see that I tend to gravitate toward media and forms that operate like machines, which intrinsically yield failures and mistakes—like having “actors” who do not know their roles in *Confessions*, or drawing with closed eyes in *The Blind Merchant* (2016). Using Russian also means undermining simplistic codifications of local (white) versus immigrant (brown or black), which people invested in identity politics seem at times almost as inclined to use as the alt-right.

HP Your work often makes a link between queer transgressive practices and current political and social frictions. What can you say about the use of these tropes to critically reflect on sociopolitical conditions in Israel and elsewhere?

RR Sexuality and desire seem to be ubiquitous in my work and they often converge on one level or another with particular political, social, and historical aspects. But it would be a mistake to lump



together these manifestations into a coherent, singular position. Yet to me, they do invariably suggest a level of direct engagement and attraction. In that sense, sexuality—besides its other qualities—denies self-removal from the topics presented and criticized. It links me, and hopefully some of the viewers, directly to the realities observed, necessarily introducing a dimension of self-reflection.

HP In *The Dust Channel*, you pay tribute to Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). How important is this film for you? Do you see yourself as working in the Surrealist tradition?

RR To begin with, *Un Chien Andalou* presents perversion, moral ambiguity, sacrilege, and horror within a bourgeois domestic setting, so it provided a terrific model. Second, despite the fact that *The Dust Channel* is a musical film, it seemed right to use a silent film as a blueprint for its cinematic devices because it is actually an oxymoron a musical silent film in the sense that the diegesis is absolutely soundless and speechless.

Un Chien Andalou is so essential and familiar that we might be numb to much of its provocative affect. In *The Dust Channel*, that affect might paradoxically reverberate by placing in its stead trivial and mundane occurrences; the slicing of an eye becomes the slicing of an egg. Elsewhere, its dream logic is denied altogether. For example: in the original, a patch of hair appears on the man's mouth, causing the woman to raise her arm and ascertain that her underarm tuft was surreptitiously snatched; in *The Dust Channel*, the man raises a feather duster to his mouth, which causes the woman to anxiously raise her arm, but since the hair is still there, the gesture seems senseless. In a way, the emotive ploy is reversed. *Un Chien Andalou* opens with a shock; *The Dust Channel* opens with a lulling pleasantness that gradually segues into a disturbing reality.

I do not see myself as a full-fledged Surrealist, but there are affinities. For instance, the Surrealists' understandings of a



revolutionary stance as a conflation—through the slogan “Liberty and Love”—of the political-collective and the libidinal-private; the central place allotted to humor; the interest (shared with Walter Benjamin, as well) in the arcane and the outmoded; and the lack of distinction between fantasy/narrative and reality.

