Running Down a Dream

An idiosyncratic collection of essays and short fictions considering an array of artistic, intellectual, and cultural celebrities.

By Louis Bury • March 20, 2016

FICTION LITERARY CRITICISM

The Irresponsible Magician by Rebekah Rutkoff. Semiotext(e). 104 pages.

REBEKAH RUTKOFF'S *The Irresponsible Magician*, a sly and seductive collection of essays and short fictions, casts literary spells that are a form of serious play. The slim book uses an idiosyncratic dream-logic to consider an array of artistic, intellectual, and cultural celebrities that includes Carolee Schneemann, Oprah Winfrey, Claude Lévi-Strauss, H.D., and Ed Harris. These considerations are sometimes poetically oblique, at other times expository and direct. Even at their dreamiest however, they are limpid and lapidary, with an understated and faintly mischievous sense of humor. Rutkoff's book represents a self-assured contribution to the recent genre of critico-fiction — an underground lineage of imaginative art-writing that includes tour de forces such as Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* (1997), Lynne Tillman's *This Is Not It* (2002), Saul Anton's *Warhol's Dream* (2007), and Raphael Rubinstein's *The Miraculous* (2014).

Works of critico-fiction tend to be formally innovative and *The Irresponsible Magician* is no exception, particularly in that the book makes no distinctions between its fiction and its nonfiction. Its 10 chapters contain myriad shapes: fragmentary meditations, fictive interviews with cultural figures both actual and imagined, a fanciful catalog, a photo essay, a work of art criticism, a travelogue. Interspersed within the text are motley color photographs that only sometimes bear direct relation to the nearby writing. A series of leitmotifs connect each of these discrete components, which make the disparate parts of the book feel related

and almost rebus-like. As in a dream, however, the ultimate meaning always slips just out of grasp. Rutkoff, as the book's titular magician, is a master of the tantalizing indirection.

Those indirections also take place in the movement of the prose. The book's three interviews, in particular, often use the question and answer format to alluring disjunctive effect. The Q's and the A's collide and then carom away from one another like billiards balls. In a brilliant imaginary interview with Carolee Schneemann, for example, the unnamed narrator-interviewer tells the story of when her family discovered that her brother could effortlessly speak words backward. Schneemann retorts: "You're worried that you're a masochist. Just ignore it until it goes away." After then explaining how, "in the onward march of female heterosexuality," women are "always re-inventing the wheel," Schneemann concludes: "Each [woman] must deplete her own resources for herself. Plus, can you imagine telling your daughter about this ahead of time? It would be like moving to Poland for good." The wry Poland simile is characteristic of the book's humor. It comes out of nowhere but has a subtlety that more ham-handed attempts at literary surprise often lack.

With its surprising juxtapositions and its many recounted dreams, *The Irresponsible Magician* shares important affinities with literary surrealism and its heirs. But the book's methodological invocations of magic separate it from its predecessors. We ordinarily consider magic either as supernatural power or as performative sleight-of-hand. In both cases, its dramatic force derives from conjuring effects that transcend everyday physics. In thinking about magic, however, Rutkoff follows anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who define magic "as a picture of change." "In its essence," she explains, "[magic] runs on the surprise and gratification of encounters with condensed, sped-up forms of change." In this view, what ultimately matters is not the bizarrerie of magic's results but the way those results become "foils to the durations by which changes of state [...] take place in non-magical life." Just as watching their children grow older makes parents poignantly aware of time passing in their own lives, magic provides, in compact form, a yardstick against which we can measure our private evolutions.

Rutkoff takes the measure of her own aesthetic evolutions in a key essay called "The Incubators." In it, she discusses the late experimental American filmmaker Gregory Markopoulos. Comprising 25 of the *The Irresponsible Magician*'s 102 highly concentrated pages, the essay is by far the longest in the book. It recounts her experience traveling, along with 200 other pilgrims, to the remote mountains of Arcadia in the Peloponnese to watch several cycles from Markopoulos's 80-hour magnum opus, *Eniaios*. The film, whose title

means “unity” or “uniqueness,” is only allowed to be screened at an open-air site called the Temenos, a Greek word meaning “a piece of land set apart for the worship of a God” or “sacred grove.” Like ball-fields and ceremonial sites, the Temenos constitutes a space set apart from ordinary life for ritualistic purpose.

In the course of her pilgrimage, Rutkoff discovers something like an *ars poetica* of reparative apartness. She initially feels anxious about her inability to capture the fleeting images of the film. She eventually comes to accept however, that the “gem-like slivers” of *Eniaios* that she remembers, are all the more powerful because they are unconsciously self-selected as her own. This acceptance of memory’s fragmentary nature is of a piece with Markopolous’s cinematic aesthetic, “which emphasizes the unit of the single frame and the still image.” Rutkoff understands Markopoulos, together with the poet H.D., as “kindred protectors of the poetics of separation”: “singling out frames, symbols and colors in the process of divining, naming and reordering one’s own objects, psychic and material.” Formal demarcations, whether in sport, ritual, or art, do not just distinguish inside from outside. In so doing, they make a bid at ordering the world.

The distinctive relationship dreams have to order and change partly accounts for the book’s fascination with them. Dreams are fragmentary and elusive, set apart from ordinary life yet contained within it. They stick with us, if at all, in slivers of shimmering image — similar to the kind Rutkoff values in *Eniaios*. But the relatively static way in which we remember and recount dreams belies the nonstop shapeshifting that takes place within them. At best, we try to account for their breakneck changes in a series of breathless “*And thens …*” that defy logical coherence and often tax the patience of the listeners. Within the phantasmagoria of dream-images, order is presumed to exist but it is hidden, encoded below the surface.

Rutkoff recognizes the lure of dream interpretation but wisely lets most of her and her narrators’ dreams stand on their own. The lack of explication endows them with an aberrant gravitas and puts the lie to the old saw that dreams are only of interest to the person who dreamt them. Again and again, in the course of an ordinary story or essay, Rutkoff will insert an unexpected “*I dreamt …*”, matter-of-factly recounting a dream that is related — sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly — to the matter at hand. This rhetorical tic asserts dreams as psychic facts as relevant and usable as any material fact. Such an emphasis contrasts with our typical assumptions about oneiric art — David Lynch’s hallucinatory narratives or Dali’s droopy clocks — in which the sheer oddity of the dream-world points up its incommensurability with the actual world.

Among the many worlds-within-worlds contained in *The Irresponsible Magicians*, perhaps the most curious is the world of celebrity. Celebrities, both intellectual and pop cultural, are everywhere in the book: from brief character sketches of various Kennedys to an offbeat interview with Oprah Winfrey to multiple fraught encounters with the art critic Rosalind Krauss. Celebrities, while inhabiting the world of the citizenry, are haloed with an aura of glamour and achievement that sets them apart. We perceive them to have undergone the pinnacle in life transformations: from humble anonymous larvae to accomplished and widely recognized butterflies. In this book however, celebrities matter because just the invocation of their name creates an electrical field of attraction around it. Whenever Rutkoff or one of her narrators summons a celebrity name, it is as though a befurred and heavily perfumed woman just strode into a crowded elevator.

Take, for example, the fictional interview with Oprah Winfrey that concludes the book. The interviewer's questions reference biographical facts of Winfrey's life. The answers however —"The gift economy of seated TV journalism is off the charts"; "Sometimes if you can find a celebrity with your own name you don't have to become one" — are pure Rutkoff. There's no attempt to plausibly ventriloquize Oprah. Instead, as with the character of Mao Zedong in Frederick Tuten's 1971 *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March*, Rutkoff generates friction from the dissonance between our cultural associations with the celebrity and what the author-puppeteer has the celebrity say and do. Even when the celebrity mentioned is a lesser light — Peter Galassi: "tall," with "his hand on the smalls of quite a few women's backs" — the name effect still exerts a gravitational force not dissimilar from the force of the shimmering dream-image.

With dreams, with celebrity names, with beguiling images, with sparkling, gem-like details (my favorite is the platter of "Campari and dirty grapes" that Louise Bourgeois serves one narrator), Rutkoff is adept at making interesting things happen on the page. The book creates pockets of unexpected energy, little black holes of mystery, and charm. But sometimes it can be difficult to discern to what end that charm is being put. "The Hour of The Star," a photo-essay titled after a Clarice Lispector novel, is emblematic in this regard. The essay's 11 homespun images, stacked vertically two or three to a page and beautifully reproduced by Semiotext(e), sometimes hint at an associative order — as in the subtle recurrence of the colors lavender and teal across the essay's final three images. And yet, it is hard to divine what exactly that order is implying. The footnoted captions for each photo — "Broken Danish chair, Brooklyn, NY"; "Fruit, Shangri-La's Mactan Island Resort,

Philippines" — provide a bit of contextual ballast but are no less enigmatic. The images presumably resonate with Rutkoff, and their apparent randomness is fittingly oneiric. But the sacred circle of art feels drawn a bit too hermetically tight here, making it hard for readers to access what's inside.

At the same time, the feeling that something enticing glimmers just out of reach is part of the considerable pleasure of reading the book. In the same way that a good magician, it is said, never reveals her tricks, it ultimately doesn't matter if you know every last one of *The Irresponsible Magician*'s wherefores and whys if you're otherwise enjoying the performance's kaleidoscopic shifts and changes. What's perhaps most impressive about Rutkoff's legerdemain is that it embodies her singular relationship to literature, art, and culture. She's refreshingly unconcerned with how you're "supposed" to engage with and respond to art—as if there could possibly be a right way. She focuses instead on inventing her own varied uses for it. The lustrous peculiarities of this unconventional approach to art-writing bespeak a quiet confidence rare in a first book. Rutkoff may not take you by the hand and explain everything but you wouldn't want her to, anyway. That sort of coddling, in its disregard for the enigmas of change, would be a bit like moving to Poland for good.

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