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Speech by Rutu Modan – Prix Töpffer de la bande dessinée 2023 Geneva, November 30th 2023

I want to express my gratitude and appreciation to those who have made this moment possible: The City of Geneva, Mr. Sami Kanaan, the State of Geneva, Mr. Thierry Apothéloz and the jury. Special acknowledgment is due to The HEAD School of Design for graciously hosting this ceremony. I would also like to thank Professor Clement Paurd the head of illustration, Manau Pavlovsky, Julietta Saccardi, and the talented students Alissa Kumpf, Sophie Hache, Fabien Duvoisin and Chiara Pugliese for their exceptional curation and design of my exhibition.

It is a special honor for me to receive The Rudolf Topffer Award. After all, he is the inventor of comics as a modern art form.

which is only the third reason I appreciate Topffer's work.

The first one is the way he chose to express his views about humanity. Topffer was aware of people's faults and stupidity. However, despite being a school teacher, he didn't choose to scold them. Instead, he found them ridiculous.

Humor is perhaps the most humanistic of our abilities. You can't be angry or afraid of someone who makes you laugh. Laughing leads to empathy, and empathy leads to identification. By seeing ourselves in others, we find it easier to forgive them for their weaknesses and mistakes and forgive ourselves. Life, in general, becomes much more bearable.

Exactly 50 years ago, a traumatic war broke out in Israel. I was seven when I created my first comic book about a war between two imaginary countries. I still have it with me. My naive, childish drawings depict gunfights, wounded soldiers, bomber planes, cemeteries, and even prisoner exchanges. What's interesting is that not only the heroes in the comics but also their enemies are drawn as cute and funny creatures. None are monsters. I remember my mother's laughter while reading my story and my surprise and satisfaction at her reaction.

Looking at it now, I understand that humor was a protecting shield, a self-defense mechanism from the violent reality around me.

Contemporary comic artists are rejecting the stereotype of the medium as "funny" to the point where they have dropped the concept of "comics" in favor of a supposedly more severe definition: the graphic novel. However, in practice, it's hard for most of them to get rid of the humor in their work, even if it's just in the way the characters are drawn. Somehow, I believe humor is a built-in component in comics, which leads to the second reason I adore Topffer's invention.

Whether it was a by-product or consciously thought of, Topffer created an art form based on the concept of parallel narratives—one of text and the other of images. They are different in character, perceived using different parts of the brain, and simultaneous, with no hierarchy between them, even when they contradict each other—which is the exact definition of irony in the Webster dictionary:

- The use of words to express something other than, and especially the opposite of, the literal meaning.

What's nice about this parallel narrative system is that, unlike what we're used to in geometry or politics, in comics, the relationships between them are much more varied and complicated. They can meet, complete or explain each other, contradict, and so on, all the way to infinity. No problem.

That is easy to say. There are times when one feels there's no funny side for anything, when one has to struggle really hard to be able to contain a parallel narrative to her own.

I refuse to live like that. That's too depressing.

To encourage myself, I tell myself this story, which I share with you:

There used to be two tiny kingdoms that lived side by side, both ruled by a powerful empire and often fighting between themselves. One time, the bigger kingdom of the two, rebelled against the empire. The outcome was devastating :



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the kingdom was destroyed and its residents exiled. Many of them sought refuge in the neighbouring kingdom.

By now the refugees numbered about a half of that kingdom's population, and the central government feared for its stability. The solution they found was to convince the members of both peoples that in fact they were originally members of one people.

This wasn't so simple. Each of the peoples had their own histories and mythological memories, passed down through the generations for centuries, and those did not necessarily fit with the other people's, considered until recently an actual enemy. Each people had their own creation myth and god, and the same battles were narrated as defeats or victories, depending on point of view. The leader of one people, considered perfect, was perceived by the other people as a mad man, etc.

It was impossible to expect the newly-arrived residents to give up their own stories and forget them. It was then decided to enmesh both peoples' stories into each other with all their contradictions. Where two versions existed, both were included. All the stories were unified into one book, about one people, with one god and one history.

The plan was wildly successful. Residents of the kingdom – both the original and those newly-arrived – loved the book, and believed in it. It became a hysterical, and historical, best-seller. Hundreds of millions read it to this day – more readers than the Ikea catalogue. Many are willing to die or (even better) murder each other to defend its ideas. So much has it become a symbol of truth that people to this day swear in court while laying their hand on it.

The book is, of course, the Bible; the ancient kingdoms are Israel and Judah; and the two unified peoples have since been called either Israel or the Jewish people. Though that is not exactly the story I was told in school, it is one theory among several possible and considered pretty mainstream today, and it has a degree of archeological and textual evidence to support it.

At any rate, I like to think that that is what happened in Jerusalem about 2,700 years ago.



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What seems to me to be the book's greatest success was exactly because of their contradictions. It is because king David is represented in the Bible as both poet and celebrated military leader and as a traitor and terrorist that he is such an unforgettable character – so much so that it is not simply the Jewish people but many others that see him as related to the Messiah (whether the one crucified or the one to come).

Combination of the two peoples' narratives resulted in complex and convincing plots, and in believable and identifiable heroes. They did terrible and wonderful things, erred and triumphed and suffered – just like us. The audience disregarded the blatant holes in in the plot and the story took so well that even non-believers quote it.

The years passed, and we find ourselves in the same place: two rival peoples, fighting each other for the death for the same land, trying to overcome each other, each one screaming its own truth and claim to justice. Are we really that limited that we cannot imagine the conflict coming to an end one day? Can we not, at least in our minds, jump over the tectonic events, still hidden from our eyes, that would lead, three thousand years hence, to a time when the Israeli and Palestinian narratives have been assimilated into one story? So convincing that anybody who objects to it would be branded as a traitor? And if we can already imagine such a situation, why can't we try and avoid the unsavoury tribulations of history and strive for it already now?

In the meantime, in the narrow piece of land where I come from, people are killing each other in ways that became crueler and murderous beyond imagination. Words are being spoken about numbers and proportions, and that's important to discuss. But if I may, just momentarily, move beyond calculus – the dream I have doesn't have any connection with mathematics, anyway – couldn't I suggest that we write one story from all the old stories? A story that will be bigger than all combined,
A terrible and wonderful and turbulent story full of holes and contradictions. One that people can live inside. It will be about how we overcame our faults and stupidities. It could be a hell of a comic book.