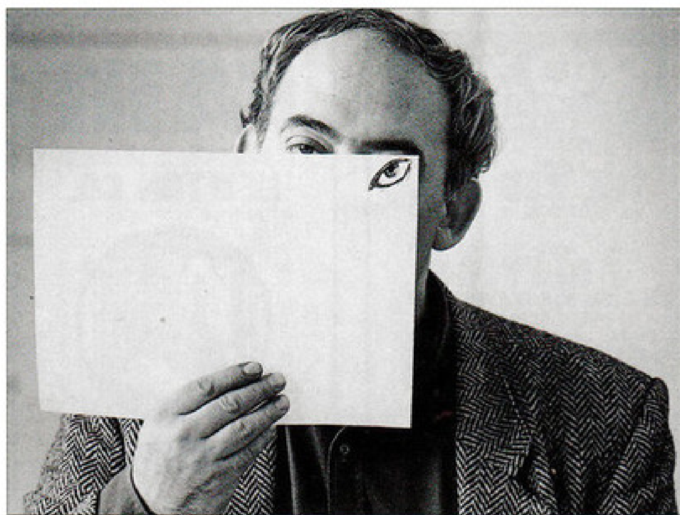


Photo: Stefan Moses, Munich, 1984

ROLAND TOPOR: 1938–1997

By Jerelle Kraus

A tribute to the late French artist by a close friend.

French artist Jean-Michel Folon tells a story about Roland Topor. It begins with Topor walking down the street, carrying an empty suitcase. He stops at a house and knocks. "Who's there?" asks a voice inside. Topor slips a card under the door that reads "Buying nightmares," and the door is opened by a woman who says, "Nightmares? I hope you pay well." Topor replies, "Madame, my business knowledge tells me that people are happy to get rid of them. They get so involved in recounting them that, in the end, they pay me."

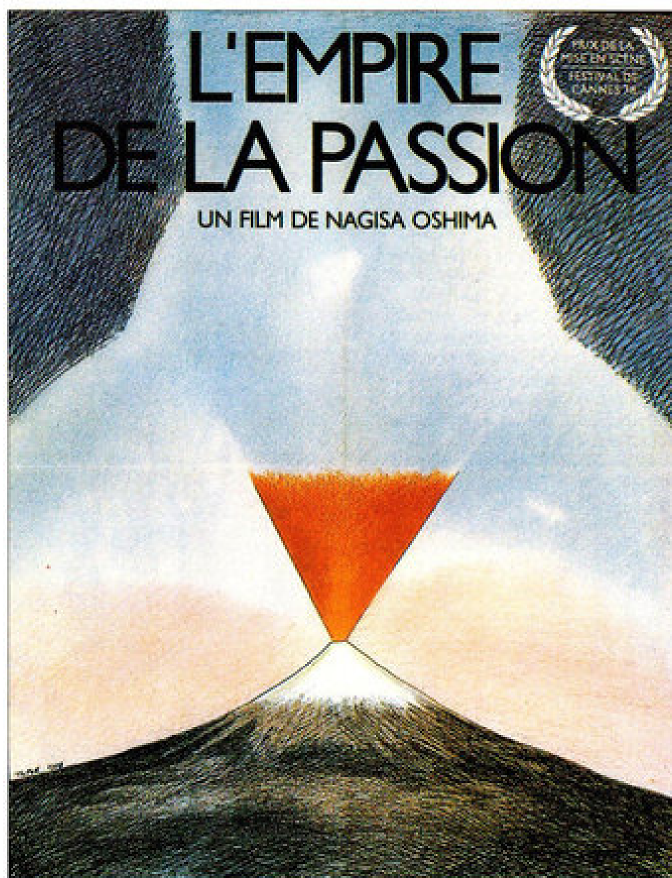
Topor returns home that night, takes the nightmares from his bag, and puts them in a bottom drawer, where they intermingle. In the morning, he pulls one out, and with black ink, swiftly draws what he sees.

Beloved by scores of friends, Topor, with heavy-lidded Peter Lorre eyes and thick lips that usually held a cigar, always had a girlfriend who was young and beautiful. (He married twice and had a son, Nicholas, with whom he remained close.) Exuberant, generous, eloquent, outspoken, and robust, Topor thrived on long nights in the cafés. He was an indefatigable artist, producing bodies of work in an extraordinary number of formats: theater pieces, posters, books, CD covers, logos, sculpture, installations, ceramics, and songs. (The songs he wrote while taking baths.) Though he didn't like opera, he designed several productions, including Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*, where the sets moved and changed, and the elaborate costumes were so bizarre that the actors at first refused to wear them. He also wrote novels, including pseudonymous romances, created television series, wrote and designed films, and dreamed of his death, the night before he died, in April 1997.

Roland Topor was born in Paris in 1938, the son of Jewish refugees from Warsaw. During the war, his family was saved by a neighbor they barely knew, who had learned from her policeman husband that they were about to be arrested. The Topors spent the war years hiding with farmers in the French countryside. Upon returning to Paris, seven-year-old Roland discovered that many children had died for lack of antibiotics during the war. His greatest wish became to reach the age of ten.

His second wish, after overhearing adults say that important people never die and are not forgotten, was to become a famous painter. But midway through nine years of academic training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Topor decided that a painter is someone who "his whole life stupidly paints potatoes and apples," and that "the painter's game is one of bullshit and tricks; I was interested in reality. It was hard to paint still-lives when I loved Orson Welles and Buñuel. Painting was about 50-year-old things; journalism and film had to do with the future."

The discovery of Surrealism—initially through Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi*, which he read at 13—freed Topor to exchange painting for drawing.



1.

2.

1. Poster for Nagisa Oshima's film, *L'Empire de la Passion*, 1978. Topor was involved in many aspects of the movie business and worked on both sides of the camera.
2. To combat his negative perceptions of opera ("Nothing moves" and "There are no surprises"), Topor designed sets that moved and elaborate costumes that were sometimes resisted by actors. These are sketches for the characters of "Clitoria" and "Helpmate of the Dead" in Ligeti's opera *Le Grand Macabre*, 1989.

"Which was good," he said, "since my paintings were bad." He began exhibiting his art at age 19, and the next year, after his mother bartered her leatherwork store to a typewriter dealer for some valuables, including a Remington, he began to write. Before turning 21, Topor had published drawings and short stories in four magazines. In 1964, at age 26, he showed drawings in Berlin and Paris, illustrated a Lawrence Ferlinghetti book, and published three books of his own, including his first novel, *Le Locataire Chimérique*, a suspenseful tale of horror. The novel, a popular and critical success in France, was released in English as *The Tenant*. Director Roman Polanski was so taken by the book that, in 1976, he turned it into a powerful film.

Topor's first anthology of drawings was published in 1968. His second volume, *Toxicology*, came to the attention in 1970 of J.C. Suarès, art director of the short-lived magazine *Scanlan's*. Suarès took an image from the book to symbolize Nixon for a cover story on Watergate. When Topor saw it, he contacted Suarès, and, in 1971, became a regular illustrator for *The New York Times*'s new Op-Ed page, where Suarès now worked. Until that time, editorial illustration tended to be either narrative or decorative; Topor is one of the people most responsible for creating the novel conceptual art style that emerged in Op-Ed. He didn't have to know American politics to illustrate the manuscripts: he was able to create powerful, provocative images by reaching below a text's literal meaning to the universal underbelly.

The human form was Topor's landscape. There he played out his fantasies, celebrated our anatomy, laughed at it, and exploited it for art. He twisted and distorted the body, knotted and sliced it, dissected and reconfigured it, turned it inside out, and made of it a spiral. Bodies sprout tentacles, tree roots, extra heads, limbs, fins, and tails; they are invaded by worms and locusts; they metamorphose into bones for the dog.

Milton Glaser contends that "without an outlet, Topor would have been an axe-murderer." Though he never confessed homicidal impulses, Roland did say, "If I didn't write or draw for a month, I'd get nervous and sick." But Glaser's choice of words is apt. When accused of making sadistic images, Roland pointed out that "topor" is the Polish word for "axe."

In 1976, Federico Fellini asked Topor to create drawings for his film *Casanova*. Upon arriving in Rome, Fellini recounted, "Topor locked himself in a hotel and launched into the work with rigorous discipline, quickly producing a beautiful series of frightening drawings." To Fellini, Topor was the last of the great illustrators. "He created a universe that, down to the tiniest detail, is an anti-world," said the Italian director. "Topor's *Pinocchio* is desolate and airless, a world in which one can't breathe. But his world without hope is so perfectly presented that suddenly it appears

3.

3. Italian film director Federico Fellini described Topor's interpretation of Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio as "desolate and airless, a world in which one can't breathe." Publisher: Gina Kehayoff Verlag, Munich, 1995.
4. Drawing published on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times* in 1983, alongside an editorial protesting Reagan's attempt to overturn the exclusionary rule, which prohibits prosecutors from using illegally seized evidence. Art director: Jerelle Kraus.
5, 6. Drawings such as "The Rope" (1981; Fig. 6) and "En Arrière" (from Marcel Aymé's *Oeuvres Romanesques*, 1977; Fig. 7) exhibit what Ronald Searle has called "the extraordinary acrobatics of Topor's imagination, which contrasts with his deceptively conventional pen."
7. This drawing, titled "Do You Want to Give Me a Hand?," was originally published in the Parisian journal *Hara-Kiri* in 1962 and then in an anthology of Topor drawings, *Toxicology*. Art director J.C. Suarès saw it there and used it again to illustrate a 1970 *Scanlan's* cover story, "Impeach Nixon."

4.

welcoming. This we have in common. Living in a Topor drawing is like living in one of my films."

Topor himself was an accomplished filmmaker. *The Fantastic Planet*, an animated work, won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes in 1972. He designed and co-wrote the 1989 film *Marquis*, a bawdy intellectual satire of Sade's life in the Bastille prison. The actors are human, but Topor hilariously masked and costumed them as animals: Sade as a libidinal dog with a rat servant; Gallic jailers as roosters. The single human character in the film is utterly lovable—Sade's appealing, voluble phallus.

Topor also worked extensively in television, creating "Twelve Months of Science News: The Improbable Academy of Roland Topor," in which he delivered scientific dialogues (1991); 30 episodes of the series "Merci Bernard" (1982); and 156 episodes of "Téléchat" (1983), a children's program done with animation and marionettes.

It was his laugh that got Topor some choice acting roles—his formidable, raucous, startling, and unforgettable laugh, like the unnerving bleating of a crazed goat. "When Roland laughs," said author Wolfram Siebeck, "leaves are stripped from plants." Playing the assistant in Werner Herzog's 1979 film, *Nosferatu the Vampyre*, Topor let out a hysterical, haunting guffaw, a sound that began in a throaty chortle and continued resounding for minutes, echoing over a vast landscape of rats. Volker Schlöndorff exploited that wicked laugh when he cast Topor as the Baron in his 1984 film of Proust's *Swann in Love*.

Topor loved hoaxes. He wrote romance novels under the names Elisabeth Nerval and Laurent Taupor, novels whose frontispieces bear high-minded quotes signed "Roland Topor." In 1996, he published *The Conceptual Photographs of Erwahn Ehrlich, 1894–1961* (Ehrlich is German for "honest"), which contains a biography of the maestro, extracts from his letters, and 34 frames, each composed of a scant blotch of ink and a cryptic German remark, such as "She is nude." A red banner across the book's cover proclaims "Revealed by Roland Topor."

Topor's demonic visions were conceived not in a garret, but in a grand house in Paris's elegant 16th arrondissement, where he lived most of his adult life. Holding places of honor in his home were a number of conventional landscapes painted by his father. Topor's description of his own working method differs somewhat from Folon's fable: "I get an idea and put it on a scrap of paper to do later. Sometimes it's a long process to think the idea through. Yet, at the end, it's just a note on a tablecloth, a Kleenex, a greasy bit of paper, a napkin."

Learning to draw, Topor believed, is like learning to knit—it should take no more than 20 minutes. But you must communicate directly from your unconscious. You must not trace or do lots of roughs, and you must

5.

6.

not listen to the client. "In eight hours of sleep," he claimed, "I get more art than in sixteen hours of activity."

When Topor died, at age 59, of a cerebral hemorrhage, every prominent European paper carried a lengthy obituary. Yet in the U.S. he remains little known. Virtually nothing has been written about Topor in English. Why? Delicate American stomachs demand their reality airbrushed; they refuse to digest his ribald black humor.

Always uncompromising, this irreverent artist never sold out. Persecuted by the tax collector, Topor died deeply in debt. But few knew this. He continued to pick up restaurant checks, create pro-bono posters for Amnesty International, and give away his books and prints.

Topor spent the last morning of his life at Café de Flore, joyously writing the first pages of his next novel. He laughed ecstatically over its opening scene, taken from his dream of the night before, in which he turned down the sheet to "discover a cadaver in my bed, the husk of a man of small size, but fat, of an age equal to mine. Who is this man? Was he the victim of a heart attack, or was he assassinated? My first reflex is to call the police. But the presence of this rotting carcass in my bed is embarrassing. Explanations will be demanded of me that I will be incapable of furnishing. They will suspect me of an abominable crime."

Topor's only crime was to reveal our brute nature. To this end, it was his own self that, with fanatical thoroughness and needle wit, he laid bare. In so doing, he reached into the collective unconscious, conjuring and gleefully spreading before us our intimate fantasies and bodily functions, turning our nightmares into his art. In the end, we willingly pay him, and our business knowledge tells us that we've gotten a real bargain.

Jerelle Kraus is art director of the Arts and Leisure section at The New York Times. *She is completing a book on the paper's Op-Ed art, a section she art-directed for 13 years.*

7.