

Rafael David Shuster

POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH PROJECT

“Laughing Angels, Crying Devils: Making Comedy in Postwar North Korea”

My research project is a book-length study that examines the social function of laughter and comedy in North Korean culture. In the late 1950s, the North Korean state launched official production of comedy films. Ever since, comedy has been used as an effective instrument of “soft power” domestically and, more recently, internationally, as well. The book undertakes a major revision of my Ph.D. dissertation, which I defended at Harvard University in 2014, based on several years of new archival research. My subsequent postdoctoral research involved additional work at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, the Center for Oriental Studies at the Russian National Library, and the Russian State Library of Foreign Literature, which all house original documents on my topic. I also culled some valuable sources from special collections of the U.S. Library of Congress and the East Asia Library at the University of Washington.

The revisions I am undertaking concern not only the addition of new chapters to and incorporation of new sources into the existing manuscript, but also a profound rethinking and reworking of the book’s overarching theoretical framework and its central thesis. My doctoral dissertation is a study in cultural history focusing on the questions of everyday agency and social nonconformism under emerging totalitarian rule in the North Korea of the 1950s and 1960s. In it, I examine the history of creating viable comic genres by the state film industry during the height of the Cold War, as well as the public

response to such official endeavors. My primary interest and motivation in doing my original research was to understand, in historical terms, the formation of the laughing subject. I, therefore, looked closely at the instances of what I call ‘inadvertent laughter’ arising from unintended failures within the production of comedy, which sustained a cautious, yet pervasive, counterculture of antidiscipline.

During my year as a postdoctoral associate and lecturer at Yale University, I became actively involved in the Yale Media Research Seminar directed by Professor Francesco Casetti, as well as seminar classes in European intellectual history taught by Professor Marci Shore. My current work reflects this recent interest in philosophy and media theory and attempts to understand the ontological, phenomenological, and epistemological aspects of the comic on and off the screen. While the laughing subject continues to play a crucial role in the comic economy I investigate, it is also laughter itself—with all its uses and misuses—which becomes the main object of my analysis in the book.

My research shows that, despite the government’s efforts to eliminate ambiguity in the new cultural texts it produced, an ordinary individual always found new ways to exercise autonomy through his unending playful subversion of official codes. By tracing the evolution of this dynamic in the North Korean streets, movie theaters, and film studios over the course of several decades, I argue that the production of formal film comedy was inextricably bound up with the state’s desire to interpellate a politically loyal and socially conformist subject with the help of comic techniques. In my scholarship, I have sought to understand how, historically speaking, the power of laughter has been marshaled in modern times to engineer new types of society and polity viewed as

progressive. North Korea proved to be a perfect case study for this historical inquiry, allowing me to examine the intertwining of politics, culture, nationalism, and popular entertainment, which we also witness today in other places. Cast as a proverbial modern joke, North Korea itself thrives on mustering the affective power of the comic and provides us with a wealth of empirical data from its postwar period up to the present day to make this kind of investigation viable.

In terms of its conceptual innovation, my project presents and elaborates on my ‘circus-state theory’ as a new paradigm for historical analysis of society, popular culture, and politics, which can be applied also to other historical contexts. In the course of next year, I plan to complete the new theoretical chapter I am currently working on and submit the entire final draft of my book manuscript to my advisers and several colleagues for review prior to contacting potential publishers with a book proposal. By the end of the fellowship period, I plan to finalize all the changes in the final draft based on the feedback I receive from my informal reviewers and officially submit my book proposal to one or two reputable university presses in the United States and Great Britain.