

**ANCA RUJOIU**



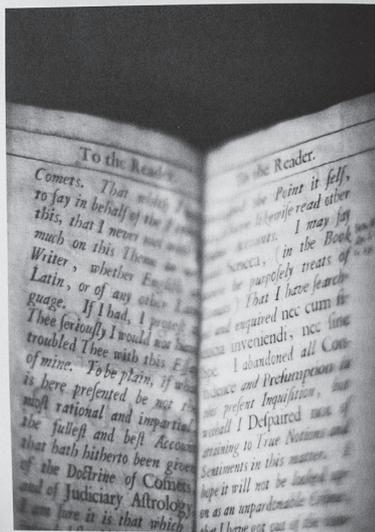
# Secret Keepers, Treasure Guardians, *Custodians of the Book*

“And so everything I see in this world, it all moves backward and forward at the same time,” admits Hantà, the protagonist of Bohumil Hrabal’s novel *Too Loud A Solitude* (1976).<sup>1</sup> For thirty-five years, Hantà turned books into pulp. He crushed tonnes of wastepaper, newspapers and unwanted books, unread, found, or simply discarded. Yet he rescued as much. He collected books in his flat, piled up to unstable, threatening tower blocks. He touched the paper ready to be compressed, absorbing the knowledge from the trash as if the ink could run through his body, like blood through the veins. When he admits he found beauty in destruction, he strikes a chord with the reader. How this savvy man, a rescuer of knowledge and books from the brink of oblivion can find beauty in their extinction?

In her ten-year, ambitious endeavour, *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, the artist Shubigi Rao unpacks in writing, film, photographs and drawings the histories of book destruction. As with the Czech writer Hrabal (who was a paper crusher from 1954 until 1959), turning banned literature into pulp, Rao has experienced the painful destruction of her parents’ library: “Our library was devastated, vandalised, books like an early edition of *Decameron* ripped from their covers to be sold as scrap. Over the years, my parents would painstakingly rebuild their library, and we would still steadily haemorrhage books through theft, termites, water and house-moving.”<sup>2</sup> The fascination with books with which she grew and formed her stunning knowledge is grounded on a lived history of their painful destruction.

The stories of book destruction in Rao’s project are delivered with the idiosyncratic flavour of a bookworm, the aspirations of a humanist, the exuberance of a storyteller, the lyrical tone of a perceptive spirit, and the sharp voice of the subaltern. The project stretches in time and space with an intimidating agility and flow of information that knows no geographical boundary, from the ancient library of Ebla on the current territory of Syria, to the nations that broke from the former Yugoslavia. Only the ten-year, self-imposed constraint by the artist will put an end to an otherwise endless research. In *Pulp...* (2016), the first volume of a projected series of five,<sup>3</sup> Rao reveals the various sources and contexts in which destruction occurs, highlighting its pervasive force, visible or invisible across human culture. There are books and libraries falling victim to humanity’s brutality in wars, acts of revenge and attacks on rival cultures. There is censorship becoming an institution in Roman times or a state apparatus in the Eastern Bloc, developing complex forms and ramifications with devastating effects on people’s lives, freedom of thought and expression. There is outdated knowledge, to which the artist draws attention, that is discarded as if innovative attempts, even proven wrong, carried no importance in opening up a new field of inquiry. There is the less acknowledged systematic silencing of subjects under patriarchal, colonial and totalitarian regimes.

PULP: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF THE BANISHED BOOK



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## Introduction

I grew up, like many self-contained but isolated children used to, safely cocooned in the rich, eclectic library of my parents. Like other such children, I was lonely but completely unaware of being lonely, and so was happy. Then when I was ten, I think, we were robbed. Our library was devastated, vandalized, books like an early edition of *Decameron* ripped from their covers to be sold as scrap. Over the years, my parents would painstakingly rebuild their library, and we would still steadily haemorrhage books through theft, termites, water and house-moving (I remember a truck packed full of books leaving Darjeeling but never reaching our new home in Delhi). As I grew, I watched helplessly as my parents' library unravelled as fast as their marriage, till their eventual separation when I was a teen. My father kept the bulk of the collection, and when he died in 2013, far from us in the Eastern Himalaya, everything vanished again.

This book, and the larger project that it is part of, is a continuation of an artistic detour I took as an undergraduate, when I started making more books than artworks. Or so I was told, for I still can't separate the two. But while the earlier works were conditional and modestly restrained, this project will dictate the next eight years of my life, as it has the last two. And while I believe it will not be enough, I feel as strongly the imperative to *make*. In the face of near-constant enacting of daily horror, tragedy, death and devastation, this is small potatoes, but I intend, at the very least, for this book (and its four fellows to follow) to be more than mere starchy, indigestible stodgy pulp. If our history is anything to go by, all books are predestined ashes, whether flying like confetti at a fascist parade, or pulped, dissolved, rendered into nothing more than fragments, scraps of phrases in the living memory of its aging readers.

To pulp books is to reduce the dangerous contagion of ideas, ethos, sensibilities and knowledge to a bland, inedible, sterile mush. Pulp is the negation of everything that is a book – its symbolic associations in the singular,

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One should be reminded that in the first decade of her practice, the artist chose to act in disguise under a male persona. She constructed S. Raoul, a slippery character with multiple biographies, but an appearance fixed to a singular image: a portrait of the artist herself with an elusive smile, defying the gaze of the viewer, and wearing a dashing moustache made from paper. Not only a tool for fiction, S. Raoul served as an artistic method to reveal how legitimacy in the field of knowledge is constructed through gender, class, and mastery of language.

In the history of book and library destruction, there are also natural disasters, fire and flood that conjoined by human's negligence or poor crisis management lead to amplified loss. In 2018, Rao was commissioned by Anita Dube, the curator of the *Kochi-Muziris Biennale*, to produce a new work. In the month of August that year, the Indian state of Kerala experienced the worst flood in nearly a century. *The Pelagic Tracts* (2018), the film component of her installation, was partially informed by the conversations with local members of the community, from librarians to boatyard workers and research on sites where the flood destroyed thousands of books. This was a devastating aftermath in a state that had the highest literacy rate, according to 2011 census in India. The title of the film combines the Greek "*pelagic*", referring to the open sea, and "*tract*", to pamphlets on political and religious topics, and a section of land. There is in the title an indication already on the relation of the sea to books, as in maritime trade and circulation of knowledge, but also as a body of water liable for their destruction. The sea features as well in the film's script, a collage of artist's writing merged with lines from Homer's *Odyssey*. Filmed across four libraries in Kochi, the film intersperses a fabricated narrative of book smugglers of so-called "*Pelagos*" with accounts on historical destruction of books and libraries, extinct languages (such as Cochin Indo-Portuguese) during colonial times. *Pelagos* refers to a fictional island invented by the artist. Islands, as Rao explains, are "*neither here or there*"<sup>4</sup> – they are strange forms of life that vanish or re-appear in cartographic representations, or spaces inhabited by the utopian imagination.

In her publications, Rao is an artist who very consciously employs conventions of bookmaking, drawing in particular to books from the rise of modern science. The book is for Rao not only a subject matter, but also a medium of production with a specific lineage and traditions. One can attempt to classify the publication *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book* as a form of cultural history. Yet, it is also an artist's book, in its definition of a "*genre which is much about itself, its own forms and traditions, as any other artform or activity.*"<sup>5</sup> The structure and design of *Pulp* is marked by self-reflexivity towards its medium and specific discourse. With a print run of one thousand copies, *Pulp* also behaves as a limited-edition artist's book. Every cover jacket has a unique ink drawing of a global map, but each incomplete in line with Rao's methodical resistance to a singular story. Placed at the beginning of the introduction, a reproduction of a pleading to the reader, photographed from a forgotten book found by the artist in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, illustrated a literary convention. A reproduction of a frontispiece, a decorative illustration conventionally placed on the verso side facing the title place, opens the first chapter of the book. One section of *Pulp* is dedicated to the tradition of marginalia, scribbled notes in the margins of pages that reflect a wide span of interactions with the books from Middle Ages copyists to present readers. In this manifestation of marginalia, personal, anecdotal comments by the artist stand alongside the footnotes. Handwritten by the artist, these notes remind the viewer of the author's subjectivity, but also of the multiple interpretations that one story or concept entails. Moreover, the footnote numbering and handwritten marginalia are rendered in a cinnabar-like colour, making reference to the use of vermilion and red in the history of book making.

In current debates concerning the printed book's future, digital culture is perceived as a threat. One is forgetful that in the book's history, the invention and the spread of the printing press did not kill off handmade manuscripts. On the contrary, the printing press and manuscript production co-existed for centuries. As a reconciliation between print and digital media, but also an engagement with the battles around open access, the artist took a deliberate decision that the open-spine binding, of thread sewn stitching would allow the book to be scanned flat. Any example of access does not end at that, there is much more to decode; one needs to peruse *Pulp* with the history of print in the background.

Unlike other film works from this project, where the prevailing form is documentary, with a focus on the interviewees' accounts, *The Pelagic Tracts* reinserts the artist's voice and subjectivity into the narrative, as in her books. Divided in several fragments, each is introduced with a reproduction from different chapter titles, the film has a fluid pace as when a breeze turns the pages of a book. The chapter titles are extracted from Francis Toker's *Yellow Scarf: An Account of Thuggee and Its Suppression* (1961), an account that enhanced the colonial imagination on the pervasiveness of organised crime in India.<sup>6</sup> The artist borrows the characters of smugglers instead and turns them into figures of anticolonial resistance. These fictitious book smugglers contributed to the circulation of knowledge, breaching in fact the monopoly of the coloniser. They were according to the artist "traders without a permit"—colonial subjects who managed to pursue their activities within the cracks of Empire.

While the film begins with images from the prestigious Artis Library in Amsterdam, it slowly shifts into scenes of wreckage of books during the 2018 Kochi floods. One man holds carefully a book damaged by water, with pages drenched and distorted, sentences rendered illegible. One can still notice a piece of transparent tape used to glue the cover. Another scene captures a desolate landscape with the ground turning into a sea of damaged books, torn apart and mixed with mud and leaves, yet to be swallowed by the soil and wrecked by passersby. Yet what strongly emerges from these images of destruction is the materiality of the books. In these saddening scenes of drenched, trashed books, what is rendered visible is their form, the paper, the spine, the binding, the thickness of the cover, the corners—the naked body of the book. It is as if only when the book is emptied of content, one becomes fully aware of its physical body. This is experienced as well in one of Rao's earlier projects and the first she made on the theme of book destruction, *The River of Ink* (2008). If *Pulp* documents the history of book destruction, *The River of Ink* performs it: hundreds of hand-drawn and hand-lettered books by the artist were soaked in fountain pen ink.<sup>7</sup> It was the same ink she used in writing and drawing, which completely dissolved leaving the books alive, in their full materiality, but bare of content. And while we acknowledge the experience of loss, futility of destruction, an act of self-silencing, we are also captured by the aesthetic appeal that the ruins of these books convey.

"Images of books that have been destroyed through negligence or catastrophe or as the result of acts of war or the nibbling teeth of mice can have, on occasion, their shocking beauty,"<sup>8</sup> writes academic Kate Flint. While her analysis focuses on artists' altered books, Flint's suggestion to turn to the theory of ruins in order to understand the phenomenon of book destruction on aesthetic ground, is relevant and helpful. Reading a damaged book like a ruin, one can understand the correspondence between the book and the human body that such images of destruction entail. It is a similar experience with architectural ruins. Our emotional response to these images is grounded on what we project upon the books, an anguish of time's irreversibility. Flint embraced this perspective

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as a form of “critical ruin gaze” or “ruinophilia”, as defined by Svetlana Boym.<sup>9</sup> While nostalgia is personal, expressing longing towards a specific place and time, ruinophilia conveys a general care for the world, sadness for its afflictions, gratitude towards its survival. Harking back to Rao’s work, the experience of loss of her parents’ library expands into a wider care for the world’s libraries, underlining how the micro has only been a starting point for a macro approach, an acknowledgment of a history of violence that goes beyond one’s personal story and has roots in the past and links into the present.<sup>10</sup>

Boym underlines this contemporary ruin-gaze as not only an intellectual experience, but also sensual, one attuned to the material transformations that ruins encounter. The sea of damaged books in Kochi is an illustration of ruins’ specificity, the blending of human’s physical creations within the natural environment.<sup>11</sup> Humanity’s creations become nature’s material. What ruins can also show us, stresses Boym, is the acknowledgment of different temporalities that co-exist in the present time and produce a state of disharmony. Modern times imply both destruction and creation, and ruins expose specifically these dynamics. Moreover, ruinophilia is not nostalgic towards the past, but rather stems from the past and projects into the future, it creates a space for utopian imagination. The invented figure of book smugglers from Pelagos provides such a space for speculation, a possible reply to the question, what if? – when one encounters irreversible acts of silencing and destruction.

Part of the film’s cast is T.A. Saleen, a scrapyard worker who the artist met in Kochi during her research. Making a living out of trashed books and paper, he managed to save from the flood and passed to the artist a copy of Homer’s *Odyssey*, that became a threadline for this film. As with Odysseus’ epic return journey to home, the history of book circulation and survival is also a story of resilience. Digging into the trash to save a book from the flood, T.A. Saleen’s gesture brings us back to Hrabal’s protagonist. Risking his job, if not his safety, Hantà often was able to rescue with much joy a precious, physical copy of classical literature. Each book he saved, whether by taking it away from the press or learning its content was a counterreaction to the brutality of the communist regime.

*But tyranny in any form is always temporary. Its weakness lies in its legitimacy being derived from the enforcement of a single doctrine, dogma and book. All it takes is a dissident or alternative idea to take root; paper will trump rock. The monolithic singular will always breed acts of resistance in print, and often they take a quieter more resilient form.*<sup>12</sup>

This act of resistance in print, in the historical context of Czechoslovakia for instance, took different shapes. One prevailing form was the *samizdat*, the system of underground publishing in the former Eastern Bloc that entailed the production and circulation of unofficial literature. *Too Loud a Solitude* was initially published through this method. Book destruction is never complete, even in the worst of times experienced by humanity. We are left to speculate that Hantà in Prague or T.A. Saleen in Kochi are themselves descendants of book smugglers. As we are told in the film, the descendants were “indentured into dump yards, scrapyards and pulping factories, forced to haul books and papers to their death.” Book smugglers are the treasure guardians, custodians of the books, those who experience destruction and construction of which the book-ruins are both the remainders and reminders.<sup>13</sup> They have the wisdom to understand best how in life history is possible for “*progressus ad futurum*” to meet “*regressus ad originem*”.<sup>14</sup> For an artist such as Shubigi Rao, whose life and work is an expression of care for books and world’s libraries, the book smugglers are a constant reminder of relentless destruction as well as a performance of hope.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bohumil Hrabal, *O singurătate prea zgomotoasă*, Bucharest: Editura Art, 2015, p. 92. For an English version, the writer used Michael Henry Heim’s translation of the book

<sup>2</sup> Shubigi Rao, *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, Rock Paper Fire: Singapore 2016, p. viii

<sup>3</sup> The second book, *Pulp II: A Visual Bibliography of the Banished Book*, was published in 2018. The third is due in 2020. A secondary publication, *Written in the Margins*, was released in conjunction with the first exhibition from the project in 2017 at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, following a residency program

<sup>4</sup> Conversation with the artist, 8 June 2019

<sup>5</sup> Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, New York: Granary Books, 1994, p. 14

<sup>6</sup> Conversation with the artist, op cit.

<sup>7</sup> A project that made the transition to *Pulp*, it is also what according to the artist killed off S. Raoul

<sup>8</sup> Kate Flint, ‘The Aesthetics of Book Destruction’, in *Book Destruction from the Medieval to the Contemporary*, Gill Partington & Adam Smyth eds, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 175-189

<sup>9</sup> Svetlana Boym, ‘Ruinophilia’, *The Off-Modern*, London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2017, pp. 43-47

<sup>10</sup> ‘A So-Far True Conversation with Shubigi Rao, about her ten-year project, *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book (2013-2023)* by Wilma Lukatsch’, *Written in the Margins*, Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2017, p. 14

<sup>11</sup> Boym includes Georg Simmel’s and Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the relation between human and nature creation in ruins

<sup>12</sup> Rao, op cit., p. 265

<sup>13</sup> Boym, op cit., p. 43

<sup>14</sup> Hrabal, op cit., p. 92