Paintbrush and Hideaway

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A secret agent speaking in the documentary television series Mossad – Cover Story says: “Being a Mossad agent is being an instrument for the creation of stories, and the story must always work on two levels: that which you tell yourself, why you are going to do what you are going to do, and that which you are prepared to tell the world.”[1] For our matter, we can change the label “Mossad agent” with another duel identity: “artist”. In both cases, prospective practitioners embark on a training course in the academy, known in internal-professional jargon as the “Midrasha” (college): one Midrasha refers to the college training Mossad agents; the other is an art school at the Beit Berl College. Regardless, the worlds in which the knowledge acquired at the “Midrasha” are used, and to which graduates are designated are (wrongly) perceived as utterly different, if not complete opposites, seeing as “exposure” is a measure of success in one – and total failure in the other. A spy is the perfect imposter, whose talents allow assimilation in closed systems, secret mechanisms and unknown sites; returning from these hidden places, zones we are unauthorized to enter or forbidden to approach, carrying an object, a piece of evidence more precious than gold for the nation whose self-definition lies in how different it is from its neighbors, evidence to assert: the land that they dwell in, good or bad?

The story Tamir Zadok is prepared to tell the world in his new video *Art Undercover*, is linked to the figure of Mossad agent Shlomo Cohen-Abarbanel (Germany, 1921- Israel, 1981). Having studied art in Paris, he left for Egypt in the 1950s as an undercover agent, in the guise of a modernist French painter going by the name Charlduval. This cover succeeded above expectations, and a solo exhibition of works by Charlduval-Abarbanel was mounted at the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art in Cairo, which opened in the presence of King Farouk. The Egyptian Ministry of Education then went on to purchase one of his paintings for the museum collection and a number of

[1] Mossad – Cover Story, 2017, director: Duki Dror, Channel 8, Supported by the New Fund for Cinema and TV.

reviews and critiques were published in Egyptian newspapers, using the period's common modern art lingo in their descriptions of the works.

Cohen-Abarbanel returned to Israel when his mission was completed and served in a number of roles in the intelligence community, including Mossad Deputy Head. Following his death the book-catalogue *Paintbrush and Hideaway* was published, presenting a selection of his works along with articles about the links between art and national intelligence.[2] One article includes this insight from Meir Amit: "It transpires that one of the most convenient fronts for a secret agent within enemy grounds is disguising as an artist. He is not required to give too many explanations about his precise actions or provide excuses for his wanderings. Everyone knows that artists are strange creatures, always in the search for individual, specific viewpoints, running around helplessly from one place to another."[3]

Meir Amit's observation takes into consideration matters of success and professionalism that test the "agent's" expressive performative skills and his ability to "pass" and assimilate within his designated field of operation – be it the art world, the regime, the intelligence community, or any other body whose actions involve the use of internal language and codes. What system of indices produces "artist" or "Mossad agent"?

Seeking to expose the backstage or the "strings" pulling the marionette theater of local history, Tamir Zadok constructs synthesized mechanisms that he then inhabits with non-actors from among his family, friends and acquaintances. The figures cast for each role must adopt the correct speech tone and act appropriately within the choreography or habitus of their given mechanism – for example, Galia Bar Or impersonating art curator, Galia Bar Or, who states at the opening of *Art Undercover* that, "At some point in life it is no longer clear what is the profession and what the impersonation." Thus Abarbanel-Charlduval becomes a successful model of hyphenated identities: a German born Israeli impersonating a Frenchman successfully assimilating in the Arab world, a spy-artist. What does this say about the art world and the profession of artist?

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[2] Shlomo Cohen-Abarbanel, *Paintbrush and Hideaway* (Tel Aviv: Intelligence Heritage Center, 1995) [Hebrew].

[3] Major-General Meir Amit served many roles in the intelligence community, including head of the IDF intelligence branch and Chief Director of the Mossad.

In the 1940s and 1970s, Tamir Zadok's grandfather, Haim Zadok, was sent on missions to Yemen and Iran. Originally from Yemen, Haim Zadok was chosen for these assignments precisely because he was a native Arabic speaker. The story of the assimilations of these two agents in Arab countries – one by impersonating an artist, the other owing to his being a "native Mizrahi" – leads Zadok to test his identity in relation to the "Arab expanse," which functions in the work on two planes: the biographical – in a sober romantic mood; and the reflexive – by gazing at the orientalist gaze on the Arab expanse from the viewpoint of the Zionist meta-narrative, which is mostly mediated through the security-defensive tool of geographical maps and guides.

Maps and guides are always products of manipulation; firstly in their being representations indicating a thing in the world that like every representation always involves abstraction, reduction and selection; the guides – more than they address a phenomenon in the world, refer to the framework of their discourse. Many of the guides at hand were written after 1967, and are expressive of the axiom: "[Cartographic] knowledge is power" [see pp. 70-71]: the world they represent reflects the attempt to determine a borderline that creates a sense of calm between "us" and "them," "them" being referred to in many of the guides as "our neighbors" – a definition that imparts amicability. The amiable border they define hints at a change in attitude toward "our neighbors" on the part of a country used to seeing its Arab (Palestinian) population move beyond its borders, and not inwards. Referring to this matter, Yeshayahu Leibowitz remarked that "These boundaries are the beginning of the fall of the State of Israel."[4]

Zadok's interest in this gaze stems from the fact that most of the authors of these guides and readers were immigrants from Arab countries, people who "visited" them in a professional-security related capacity, or both. Most guide writers adopt the western-orientalist perception of the places which they themselves come from, places whose landscape impression molded their individual identities. For example, when agents of "Hashahar," the Palmach unit of "Mista'aravim" (Jewish men passing as Arabs in the service of national interests – seen in the photograph at the opening of the catalogue), return to their countries of origin as "Mista'aravim" – then, in queer discourse terms, they are enacting identity over-performativity when they stand, all very manly, in typical tourist-photo poses. In this sense these photographs are totally different from Zadok's

[4] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Faith, History, and Values* (Jerusalem: Academon, 1981), p. 214 [Hebrew].

other works – such as *Landscape* and *Welcome* – which mix genres by way of war-snapshots mimicking tourist-snapshots: Lebanese citizens captured through a passing tank (written on the back of the photo: “Lebanese welcoming our arrival”); or a generic landscape (on the back: “Beaufort Castle rising in smoke immediately after its capture by IDF”; using the descriptive language of family photo albums, in the vein of “London in the rain”).

Zadok too, in his internal-artistic performative processes crosses the boundaries of the official story: the story of the search for the Abarbanel-Charlduval painting that was left behind. This conceptual transgression forces him to acquire “Arab” skills and seriously question the possibility of a biographical return to an alien expanse and identity. Zadok himself becomes a “Mista’arev” of sorts, “dressing up” in Arabism in an attempt to obtain something beyond the border.

The al-Mutanabbi Test

When crossing Israeli borders, security inspectors ask travelers a series of questions whose aim is not to determine if they did in fact “pack their luggage alone.” The inspectors need a few seconds to determine if a traveler’s appearance, hand-baggage and declared identity pass the test “Arab vs. Western.” Nothing sharpens the definition of identity quite like a border checkpoint. However, what happens to people who identify as “Jewish-Arab”?

“Jewish-Arab” is a hyphenated hybrid entity that challenges the genealogic distinctions determined by the Jewish-Ashkenazy nation State. The conception of national identity developed in modernity to gather residents of different areas, who did not know each other, under the cover of an invented collective identity that simulates communal similarity among strangers. In Israel this framework also distinguished between two sub-identities, “Mizrahi” and “Ashkenazy” – whereas the Arab was marked as the ultimate other, defining Israeliness by way of opposition. In 1967, cracks began appearing in the Zionist meta-narrative as a result of the containment of so many Arabs – the negative of Jewish identity – within the (positive) living expanse of Israelis. Concurrently, light was cast on the denied-repressed Arab component in the identity of Mizrahi Jews, encouraging buds of social activism in the form of the 1970s Black Panthers and continuing in the modern Mizrahi identity discourse in culture and

academia. And yet, with caution, it can be said that the cultural dominance in Israel still exhibits the type of "orientalism" defined by Edward Said.[5]

This context recalls the four conditions that label a person "Jewish-Arab,"[6] enumerated by Professor Sasson Somekh – himself a self-described Jewish-Arab Iraqi-Israeli writer and scholar: "Arabic, in one of its dialects must be his native tongue; he must be born and raised in an Arabic speaking Jewish community within an Arabic speaking country; and his core education must be acquired in Arab culture. In this sense, if taken to the extreme, I would say that for a person to be 'Jewish-Arab," the first poet he ever reads must be al-Mutanabbi, the greatest of medieval Arab poets."[7]

According to these indexes, and in terms associated with the literary motif of "the return of the prodigal son" or "the homecoming," Zadok's trip to Arab countries in *Art Undercover* recalls the protagonists in Yaakov Shabtai's *Past Continuous*; their literary wanderings in Tel Aviv – the city built by the founding fathers no longer knows them, and neither they her. In so he is like the outsider-insider, a descendent of Biblical Moses who, according to Edward Said, is a Jewish-Arab.[8] The first half of the film presents a host of experts. It then follows Zadok on a contrapuntal journey bouncing between changing forms and genres; a journey whose main thrust is internal, coiling away from the characteristic momentum of earlier works, such as the single-genre *Gaza Canal*. By the end of the film Zadok succeeds in a "fabricated" assimilation into the Arab expanse thanks to his acquired profession, artist, and not owing to his biographical, seemingly "natural," Jewish-Arab identity.

Men Playing History

"Masculinity" constructing mechanisms are at the center of Zadok's work and the exhibition *Art Undercover* is populated with spies, soldiers, neighborhood male gangs and boxers, all playing war and history. Zadok has his nephews navigate obstacle courses in abandoned army bases. Friends and family members are cast in the photographic series *Bourekas Filmstills,* a defined cinematic genre that triggers among viewers a sequence of Pavlovian responses: if the hero is wearing a white "wife-beater"

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[5] See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New-York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
[6] For me see Lital Levi, "Who is Jewish-Arab? A Comparative Study of the History of the Question, 1880-2010," *Theory and Criticism*, 38-39 (winter 2011), pp. 101-135 [Hebrew].
[7] Sasson Somekh in an interview with Almog Bahar, Journal 77, 35 (Nov 1989) [Hebrew].
[8] Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2002).

shirt, looks like a delinquent, plays backgammon and moves in a pack – he must be a Mizrahi. Analyzing these stereotypes does not lead to a deeper understanding of the problem of representation; however, exposing the genre's consistency uncovers aspects of its operational mechanism and its creators' agendas. 1960s and 70s Bourekas films spin a didactic allegory about racial tensions and ethnic conflicts among Mizrahi and Ashkenazy Jews, with Ashkenazy masculinity presented as weakened, in contrast to the hegemonic status of the Ashkenazy man in real world hierarchies. Stereotypical Mizrahi items of clothing, such as the wife-beater shirt Zadok wears in many of his photographs, are linked to workers, physical labor and bodily strength – properties attributed to "natural" masculinity and the "manly man" whose naturalization does not require physical transformation into muscled Judaism. The white shirt is present also in *The Matza Maker*, a tongue-in-cheek piece about the sloppiness of DIY involved in building a simple machine that produces Matza from the blood of Jewish children. However, the DIY business attends mostly to the simple means and easy construction of stereotype-based genre narratives, including those that do not center on blood libels. The format of the "Visitor Center" appropriated in *Gaza Canal*, for example, is just as simple.

The *Gaza Canal*, mockumentary describes a fictional occurrence, according to which in 2002, Gaza strip was dug up and detached from the mainland, in a national operation called Quiet Waters. Following this extreme act of separation, an imagined community develops that leaves behind all of the racial, national and economic conflicts, transforming Gaza strip from a battered battle zone into a prospering ecological Island and tourist site.

The video is structured in the form of a public information film produced by the "Yitzhak Rabin Gaza Canal Visitor Center." It follows the digging of the canal, done cooperatively by Jewish youths and Arab workers, and with a bit of help from supernatural forces – an earthquake that happens to hit the area moves Gaza Island from Israeli shores. The infomercial style interviews with the project leaders – headed by Infrastructure Minister, Melamed, played by Zadok's father – use terms from models of Zionist country-building along with Shimon Peres's vision of a "new Middle East," satirizing the security-defensive aspect behind which hide the project's largely financial motives. Yet an emotional manipulation infiltrates the semiotic-intellectual plane when the simple graphic means fail to abolish the effectiveness of the intentional consequences, the viewer's desire that the conflict will just simply go away, disappear,

and even more so in an inverted realization of the idiom of Arabs wanting to “throw us into the sea.” Zadok’s command over the workings of the cinematic genre brings forth the gap between ethics and aesthetics without having to appeal to a single ethical question.

The final model Zadok attends to is also the most archetypical and complex: the family. “Being an artist is being an instrument for the creation of stories, and the story must always work on two levels: that which you tell yourself, why you are going to do what you are going to do, and that which you are prepared to tell the world.” To that I will add: and the story you are not yet ready to disclose.