
Ghost Town

By Malkit Shoshan

In 1948, Israel fought its War of Independence. One consequence was the destruction of more than 500 Palestinian villages and the creation of hundreds of thousands of refugees.

The new government then appropriated the land and property the refugees had left behind.

In 1951, the Israeli government attempted to settle a group of Jewish immigrants from North Africa in Ein Hawd, one of the confiscated and newly deserted Palestinian villages.

But shortly after arriving, the Jewish immigrants fled. They claimed the village was haunted by demons.

North Africans call the demons jinn. The jinn can harm humans, and even kill them. They might throw stones at a person or try to terrify him, or take some other action in the real world.

A man could be alone, in a deserted place, and a rock could come out of nowhere to hit him, or there would be noises like voices or the rustling sound of a tree to make him feel distressed and scared.

A jinn may also enter the body of a human. Some of the villagers that are still living in the area of Ein Hawd tell stories of thousands of eyes watching in the dark from the surrounding mountainside, of stones raining down from the sky, of sad songs echoing around like in funeral processions from deep inside the mountain.

They say the mountain vomited the settlers out and they left in fear – leaving the stone houses of Ein Hawd behind.

The belief in demons and a separate mystical world can be found in Judaism. It has recognised *shedim*, or spirits, in various forms. It considered the relationship of these entities to human bodies or to space. It is said that the *shedim* were created in the twilight on the eve of Shabbat, in a liminal zone between profane and holy time.

They continued to exist in liminal locations such as ruins, the inaccessible areas of buildings and water holes, wells, ponds or springs. In some of these tales, the demons are conceived as “owners” of the water source.

Demons may attack people at night, but prefer in particular those transitional periods when light turns to darkness, and vice versa, and time itself shifts from sacred to profane.

A Jewish Rabbi once told a story:

I was once travelling on the road, and I entered into one of the ruins of Jerusalem in order to pray. Elijah of blessed memory appeared and waited for me at the door till I finished my prayer.

After I finished my prayer, he said to me: Peace be with you, my master!

and I replied: Peace be with you, my master and teacher!

And he said to me: My son, why did you go into this ruin?

I replied: To pray.

He said to me: You ought to have prayed on the road.

I replied: I feared passers-by might interrupt me.

He said to me: You ought to have said an abbreviated prayer.

Thus I then learned from him three things:

One must not go into a ruin; one may say the prayer on the road; and if one does say his prayer on the road, he recites an abbreviated prayer.

He further said to me: My son, what sound did you hear in this ruin?

I replied: I heard a divine voice, cooing like a dove.

Demons, jinn or souls of the dead can possess a body, an act also known as aslay, dybbuk or za'ar.

A person (usually a woman) possessed by a jinn can suddenly fall into hysteria and manifest paranormal behaviour, including speaking in a voice other than her own and episodes of contractions and seizures, and abnormal strength. Dybbuk is the belief that the spirits of the dead can possess a living body. It was a common belief among Eastern European Jews.

She stepped onto the cabaret stage, ribboned about the neck, her face waxen [...] Who can stop this girl – who is hysteria herself [...] from swelling to an icefall? [...] Covered with makeup, hypnotizing with morphine, absinthe, and the bloody flame of the electric glory, a violent distortion of the Gothic, her voice hops over corpses, mocks them, soulfully trilling like a yellow canary.

When possessed, a person may talk in the simplest possible phonemes, in a guttural way distinct from their usual voice, almost as though they are speaking an unknown language.

In an episode of possession, a person will have a different awareness of the present and sometimes the magical ability to predict the future.

Jinns can change the behaviour of the possessed over time. But when possession ends, the formerly possessed person will have partial or complete amnesia.

The brief stopover of the North Africans was neither the first nor the last attempt by the new Israeli government to make use of the recently emptied Ein Hawd.

From 1948 to 1953, the stone houses of the village were their own liminal zone, in transition from one world to another, a town of temporary inhabitants.

First, the Israeli army used Ein Hawd as a place to practice urban warfare, often using life ammunition that damaged severely the Palestinian property.

The North African immigrants came next – and quickly left.

Third to arrive was a group of Orthodox Jews who had left Gush Etzion, a moshav in the West Bank, themselves displaced when the moshav became Jordanian territory after 1948.

They temporarily settled in Ein Hawd until the first construction of their new village, Nir Etzion, was finalized. Nir Etzion was placed a few hundred metres north-east of Ein Hawd, on the village former agricultural land.

When their kibbutz was ready, the Orthodox Jews abandoned the old stone houses of Ein Hawd for their new concrete homes, leaving Ein Hawd empty again and more dilapidated than ever.

The fourth and final transformation came in 1950. When art, or more precisely a Dada artist, intervened.

A STRANGER COMES TO THE VILLAGE

I believe [a] Dadaist is a man that lives and does not dream or talk about theory.

We are Dadaist in principle, people that feel and cherish life and build everything toward life.

I cannot tell you in what sense I am happy.

It is possible that I have become 50% Dadaist.

I have changed.

I am not the same man I was in Zurich.

(Marcel Janco: 50% Dadaist video interview found on YouTube)

Marcel Janco arrived to Ein Hawd in May, 1950. He said later that when he approached the village, he heard the sound of the army blowing up buildings to remove hiding places for trespassers.

One of the biggest manipulations of the jinn is through hallucination. Through these illusions the jinn are more likely to lead people astray. When a person sees a vision in front of his eyes it is something that is very hard to explain.

When Janco discovered Ein Hawd he was a government employee. Observing and surveying Israel's landscape for the creation of new parks and open public spaces. Janco was also a Dada artist, one of the founders of Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich during the First World War.

He is best known for the masks he created for the performances at the cabaret.

After the First World War, Janco returned to his native country, Romania, where he worked both as an artist and as architect. He designed buildings in modern and functionalist styles.

Janco did not leave Romania until January 1941, after witnessing the Bucharest pogrom publicly torture and slaughter approximately 125 Jews. He reached Palestine in February, seeking safety and a place to create a new world. Janco made remarkable contributions to the rising new society. His fame as a pioneering Dada artist helped to make 1940s Palestine a place for an international exchange of art and ideas, promoting the emergence of a new country.

Janco was fascinated by various aspects of the local "Orient", just as Picasso had once been interested in the "primitive". His particular interest was in the forms and crafts of local culture. Janco surveyed Palestinian architecture and promoted its preservation. His attachment was to buildings and structures, and not to the people who made them.

He wanted to preserve original neighbourhoods so that they could become an inspiring cultural context for incoming artists and provide new homes for creative people.

He had comparatively less interest in the people already living there.

Janco once said:

« I can say about myself, I have two Jancos inside of me. I was born twice, I have inside of me a man who guards my thoughts, but also a man who beats me.

I did not do what I needed to do all my life. I am not at peace in my heart. I think that I have done a lot: I worked; I was productive.

I was an activist. My pursuit was to build a world of human culture, but today I cannot see tomorrow ».

A COMMUNE OF ART

The early twentieth century is rich with examples of emerging communities that experimented with new lifestyles. It was a human reaction to the harsh reality of rising violence.

In 1921, a Basel newspaper offered its readers a package tour to the battlefields of Verdun, promising « the quintessence of the horrors of modern warfare ».

The Vienna critic Karl Kraus once wrote:

« I am holding in my hand a document which transcends and seals all the shame of this age. After the monstrous collapse of the fiction of culture, the age has nothing left but naked truth of its condition, so that it has almost reached the point where it is no longer capable of lying ».

One of the most notorious alternative colonies was Monte Verità in Switzerland.

It was established in the early twentieth century on the principles of primitive socialism, rigid morality, vegetarianism and nudism.

The colonists dogmatically rejected conventions in marriage, dress and party politics. They were described as "tolerantly intolerant". Art was a central part of the daily life there.

Among the colonists was Hugo Ball, a colleague of Marcel Janco in the Dada movement at Cabaret Voltaire. He joined Monte Verità after his time in Zurich.

Art has a long history of being used as an instrument to promote ideology, as it is free to move from the imagined and the real. It can narrate and illustrate alternative realities: as such, it is often seen as an effective tool to achieve political or ideological change in a short time.

Janco's creative role in Palestine and later in Israel included close collaboration with Arie Sharon, the great founder of Modernist architecture in Israel. Sharon had been a young kibbutz pioneer in Palestine and then a student of the Bauhaus school in Dessau. He was a skilful architect and planner who returned to Palestine in 1931 to renew his passport; But as the Bauhaus confronted increasing opposition from the Nazis in Germany Sharon decided to stay in Palestine.

He was a passionate believer in Modernism. He was a busy pioneer, designing cities, agricultural localities, public spaces, housing blocks and so on. For Sharon the tabula rasa, the blank sheet, wasn't just a starting point for his designs. It was integral to his ideology.

It allowed Sharon to implement his design on top of and next to existing Palestinian localities. Modernism was the fundamental strategy for creating Israel. It collapses history and ignores context: it made the massive planning of the new state look almost naive.

Sharon's first designs, before 1948, filled empty or legally purchased lands.

After the establishment of Israel, his opportunities expanded and he planned hundreds of new localities on top of confiscated Palestinian villages and land.

These top-down designs destroyed many Palestinian villages, implementing Israel's political decision to create a new reality and erase the traces of the Palestinian past.

After 1948, Janco worked, like Sharon, at the governmental planning department.

Janco supervised the mapping of the open spaces in the new country and cataloguing its potential national parks and forests. Like Sharon, his work was visionary. Janco sought to find the future potential of the landscape and opportunities to narrate the stories of the spaces that remained in between - unbuilt.

TRANSFORMATION

One of the most frequent activities associated with jinn is fortune telling. The jinn will go to the lowest heaven and listen to the angels conversing among themselves about events of the future. When a jinn possesses a person or a place the person can predict the future.

Marcel Janco recalls:

« The beginning of Ein Hod was unique: in 1950s I was sent by the Government Planning Authority to explore the mountains of Israel in order to make recommendations for the creation of National Parks. In this connection I came upon a hill of the Carmel range opposite the Crusaders' castle of Atlit. The beauty of the place was staggering. I had been told that this village was to be demolished. The sea, the special character of the stone buildings, the feeling grew: forbidden to touch here. Normally, Arab villages are built of mud and straw – but here I saw stone structures built in a very special manner. Without any clear notion, I felt this place had historical content that bound it to the history of our country. But what to do with it? It became clear: the site must be used to create an artists' village ».

Janco succeeded in persuading the Israeli government to allow him to take over the village and turn it into an artists' colony.

Hugo Ball once wrote about Janco's contribution to Cabaret Voltaire:

We were all there when Janco arrived with his masks, and everyone immediately put one on. Then something strange happened. Not only did the mask immediately call for costume, it also demanded a definite, passionate gesture, bordering on madness. Although we could not have imagined it five minutes earlier, we were walking around with the most bizarre movements, festooned and draped with impossible objects, each one of us trying to outdo the other . . .

The masks brought forth slow dances made up on the spot and named after the fact: "festive despair", "nightmare", "fly-catching". In any case, the masks affirmed the existence of a language no one knew how to speak, but which contained the only words capable of forming the only truth worth knowing."

Like he did with his masks, Janco injected Ein Hawd with new content. He worked with a group of avant-garde artists. Many of them, like Gertrud Kraus, had been educated at the best art schools in Europe. They fled the old trembling continent – before during and after – the Second World War. Step by step, Janco realised his dream of filling up the old village with avant-garde art. He turned the old mosque into a café, inspired by Cabaret Voltaire, used as a place of pleasure and performances. Wild Purim parties in Ein Hawd were known all around the country. The artists turned the entire village into a stage, performing in exotic costumes in which the orient and the oriental played a prominent aesthetic role, and when often, Janco was dressed as a local Arab sheikh.

Elsewhere in the village, artists turned houses into studios, ruins into public spaces or outdoor art galleries, and cemeteries into gardens.

Everything remaining in the Palestinian village became an object of art. During one of the art collective's first meetings, the artists discussed a new name for the village.

Some wanted to name it Picasso, some Chagall. Eventually they chose Ein Hod, which means in Hebrew means "the place of glory and splendour". The sound of it is almost Dada – using a phoneme of the Arabic version of the village name, Ein Hawd, which means "a source of water" – "a spring".

Ein Hod became the biggest artists' settlement in Israel, notorious for its alternative and bohemian lifestyle.

The art produced by the artist colonisers of Ein Hod had an important role in creating the ethos of the modern Jewish state by linking it conceptually and aesthetically to its past.

FOUND OBJECTS

In 1948, during the War of Independence, the Israeli army had attacked Ein Hawd three times. After the third attack, they occupied the village, forcing its Palestinian inhabitants to flee. Many of the Palestinians hoped that their exile would be temporary. They quickly dug holes in their gardens to hide precious property such as rings, necklaces, vases and wedding gifts. During the 1950s, one of the avant-garde artists discovered an object in the garden of his new studio. He was convinced that he had found a Roman relic. Others started digging and looking for hidden treasures, and they found them.

Although it was Palestinian property they were uncovering, the artists created their own narrative of the origins of these discoveries.

They invented a new history for Ein Hod, using the found objects as their starting point. The artists used the objects to give Ein Hod a phantom archaeological past, linking it to the time of the Crusaders or Romans, bridging the millennia from modern times to an ancestral period 2,000 years before.

The objects proved the artists belonged to this place and they hung them in galleries, inventing and sharing their histories with anyone who cared to listen.

Dada in Palestine, in Ein Hawd, helped link Zionism to the land. Artists, painters, photographers, writers and architects narrated the landscape as if Palestine were never there, or as if Israel were always there.

In their work Ein Hod's artists helped bring to life a national narrative. Art defined Zionism by linking Judaism, modernity and the local context to each other.

The truth itself was never a concern. Art does not need to prove itself right and has no obligation to ethics, history or fact. Liberation from responsibility makes art powerful because it operates on the visual level, the sensual, not the rational or just. The artistic national narratives that were invented in Ein Hawd quickly replaced memories of Palestine with an emerging Israeli ethos.

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