

## A Portrait: Myth and Meaning

For millennia, myth has been a device through which stories have been told and retold, orally in times past and, more recently in writing. Myth provides a metaphor for the achievements and struggles in the life of a people, which, when interpreted in future generations, can provide a sense of meaning and understanding of the present. “The *mythic* and *ritual*, that is, our analogic reasoning and our patterned behaviors, condition our relationship with texts and interpretations and are conditioned by them as well” (Real, 1996, p. 41).

It was with the classical myth of Sisyphus in mind that Palestinian artist Tarek Al-Ghoussein created a self-portrait series comprising eight large digital prints. This series was first exhibited at the Sharjah International Biennial 6 in spring 2003. He has since shown the work internationally in Germany, New Zealand, Denmark, The Netherlands and Bangladesh. Although the series consists of eight prints, I will focus on *Self-Portrait 1*: the artist, dressed in black with his head wrapped in a Palestinian khaffiya, striding alongside a large flat-bed truck on which is stacked a number of huge stones.



*Self-Portrait 1*: 2002 Digital Print

In this paper, I will explore the meanings of the myth represented in this photograph, through an exploration of both the artist’s intention (contrary to Barthes argument below) and interpretations of the ‘text’ itself by various spectators. I do not intend to comment politically beyond what the artist asks us to consider, and any references to ‘the struggle’ in this paper will necessarily be from a Western interpretation of the Palestinian point of view. I will look at the “larger context, intent and meaning ... exactly what was intended by the text’s creator” (Real, p. 22), and to critically evaluate the aesthetics of the photo, the power and conflict represented there, ideology,

human values and bias, using “signifying practices” inherent in “myth.” The problematic I explore is how this text and this medium represent, communicate and influence aspects of culture.

The listener, the reader or, in this case, the viewer of myth is compelled to bring his/her own meaning to what is being heard, read, or seen. “Barthes argues that texts only become meaningful in the process of consumption. The meaning of texts is not to be found in identifying what the author intends but in what readers, viewers and listeners bring to the text” (Williams, 2003, p. 143). This photograph is “a media message through which the culture expresses itself and from which we create interpretations” (Real, p. 21).

### **The Myth: An Ethnographic Beginning**

The eight photos in the self-portrait series were taken over the course of a year through 2002 and 2003. The impact of art is often dependent on what the context is. From what current political and cultural events does this image arise and to what does it speak? In this case, the context and events lend special power to the creative work.

The year 2000 marked the beginning of the Al Aqsa Intifada, the second Palestinian intifada. The first intifada, which ran from 1987 from to 1993 (the time of the Oslo accords), was known as the “war of stones.” It was thus named because Palestinians often resorted to throwing stones at advancing Israeli soldiers, usually heavily armed and/or in tanks, and Western media often published pictures of just that. Other media representations commonly portray the Palestinian as terrorist – a strange juxtaposition considering the view (of Palestinian as defender) presented in the aforementioned pictures.

The intifada is often considered by Palestinians as a war of national liberation against foreign occupation, and by Israelis as a terrorist campaign on the part of the Palestinians. In Al-Ghoussein’s words, “[s]ince the mid-1980s the news media have associated the Palestinian intifada with stone throwing and other acts of violence. Transcending media representations has been an ongoing ‘uphill battle’ for Palestinians” (Al-Ghoussein, 2003).

Further, Al-Ghoussein says, “I was drawn to the apparent similarities between the Myth of Sisyphus and what I have observed to be a growing ‘myth’ generated through the Western media, specifically the myth that all Palestinians are terrorists and that the Palestinian intifada, like Sisyphus, seems condemned to an endless cyclic struggle.”

### **Bringing Meaning to Light**

“Today the artist must confront himself. Faced with a society that has lost the very idea of meaning ... the artist must ask himself to what purpose he writes or paints. [This] is the one question that counts” (Paz cited in Real, p. 259). According to Al-Ghoussein, the purpose in developing this series was to speak to the (Western) media representation of Palestinians as terrorists. *Self-Portrait 1* was the first image he produced, and it was one that he had considered for some time. It was the culmination of a year or more of thinking about connections between the scarf and the stone and about their relation to the Palestinian struggle, especially as it relates to the myth of Sisyphus.

In this photograph, the artist exhibits a duality; he is both the photographer and the photographed. He has placed himself, as a representative of Palestine, within the ‘frame’ of the images. In this particular photograph, the character portrays that of the ‘exiled’ Palestinian on a journey searching for identity and place. One reviewer noted that the series is a “scenograph of placemaking” and that the “ambiguity of the Palestinian exile is palpably present” (Giesen, 2003). The artist notes that the stone and the scarf symbolize the struggle and are “the ‘trademarks’ of the intifada” (Al-Ghoussein).

When exhibiting the self-portrait series, Al-Ghoussein recontextualizes these ‘trademarks’ “using the light box, a medium traditionally reserved for advertising and the promotion of consumer goods,” and in so doing presents the viewer with an interpretation of images as “a commentary on contemporary Western media representations of the Palestinian as terrorist” (Al-Ghoussein). Not apparent in a print reproduction, this display style adds to the contextualizing of the image.

In this particular photograph, and in fact in the whole series, “ideology is laid bare. Its meaning is not hidden because the visual language of the picture anchors and relays the message”

(Trifonas, 2001, p. 27). Al-Ghoussein intends to shed light on the fact that Western media tend to ‘sell’ the image of Palestinian as terrorist. His aim is to call into question this commodification of Palestinian identity. But he does so by ‘dressing the part’ instead of through negation. He purposefully presents an image of the stereotype, rather than countering it. At the same time, he offers ambiguity, a question, and an invitation to the viewer to explore a range of interpretations. He does not ‘tell’ the viewer what to think or how to see. In an unpublished review of the series (received as personal correspondence by the artist), Henry Symonds (p. 2) notes that “through reference to a universally recognizable myth—in this instance Sisyphus—he locates his concerns within a space which allows for a rich web of allusions and connections to be made.”

### **Global Perspectives**

The artist himself has an interesting bicultural perspective. In an interview with Antonia Carver, Al-Ghoussein notes “‘Mentally, my taste in art and music is western, ... but my heart, my values, my upbringing, are Arab.’” This perspective, when situated within myth-making and interpretation, indicates that Al-Ghoussein provides us a view of the dialectic within both himself and his art. Symonds (p. 3) notes that “[t]he references to hybridity, migration, the diasporic condition, an articulation of a hyphenated identity in Tarek Al-Ghoussein’s positioning of himself as both Western and Arab, the stereotype and the potential reading of his work as an act of counter discourse are all available readings and points of engagement.”

“Through our screens we are witnessing the emergence of a new world order. It is most commonly through their screen images that we encounter the others in this globalizing culture. But what kind of witnesses are we? What is the nature of the close encounters we have with those who are far away?” (Robins, 1996, p. 6).

I suggest that the word ‘screen’ in the above passage reflects a play on both the metaphorical ‘screen’ of cultural biases and the actual media ‘screens’ of television and film. What are the different cultural interpretations of this series by those who have ‘screened’ it, and can those differences of interpretation be mediated in some way to bring about a consensus, or at least a deeper understanding, of meaning?

Both the choice of presentation medium and the places in which the installation has been exhibited point to Al-Ghoussein's intent to bring to the fore, in mainly Western countries, the ideology at work in the Palestinians' experience of the world, to have the viewer "explore how images ... are involved in the ways we know, experience, feel about, and respond to, the world" (Robins, p. 5). The displaced Palestinian refugees in Gaza will not see these photographs. Rather, the audience has been (and likely will continue to be) the 'cultured' classes in the Arab, Western, and Asian worlds. Perhaps, because of this, the artist is 'preaching to the choir.' Invitations to exhibit his installation have come from 'sympathetic observers' who themselves are interested in exploring both photographic art and the social and political concerns of the day.

Will this image change their view of the dominant 'myth' within their own culture? Will it inspire, or give pause for reflection, or even "induce us, vaguely, to think"? (Barthes, 1981, p. 38). Commentary on the series indicates that, indeed, a certain amount of interpretive reflection is occurring. VPRO TV in the Netherlands produced a 15-minute documentary film on Al-Ghoussein and his work. In it, one of Al-Ghoussein's photos, where the scarved figure is walking towards an airplane, and which had appeared in black and white in a daily newspaper, was shown to a number of people in both Amsterdam and Sharjah, who were asked for their interpretation of the photo.

All of the Dutch responses were that this was a photo of a (potential) terrorist. In Sharjah, reactions were mixed. Although Arab shopkeepers and university students thought it 'probably' represented terrorism, labourers (most of whom would have come from the Indian subcontinent, and many of whom, themselves, had their heads wrapped in a variety of scarves) had several different interpretations, from "is he the pilot?" to "he is only protecting his head and face from the wind and sand" to "he must be going to clean the plane." An argument ensued when one of the men suggested the figure in it might be a terrorist. There was no general consensus and a noted lack of presupposed 'terrorism.'

Also in the video, students viewed first the newspaper version, and then the colour photograph by itself, and finally the photograph in the context of an exhibition of the full series. They clearly indicated how their interpretation changed with the context of the setting. The black and white

‘news’ photo provided the strongest connotation of the figure as ‘terrorist,’ was seen as the most intimidating, and was also assumed to be most ‘true.’ (It was, after all, in the newspaper!) Seeing the photo in colour by itself softened the prejudice towards that connotation, and in viewing all the photos collectively in an exhibition titled *Self-Portrait*, the students reported that it became one of several images communicating a specific cause and reflecting a more personal experience.

### **Cultural Dialectic and Conversation**

“[Barthes] argued that the importance of the media in the dissemination of ideology or views of the world rested on their ability to structure signs and images in particular ways ... [and] convey deeper meanings within society and culture than might outwardly appear so” (Williams, p. 55).

Al-Ghoussein’s decision to exhibit the photos in light boxes installed in a darkened room provides a two-way conversation between the viewer and the images themselves. The viewer is confronted not only with the image but also with the ‘reflection’ from the light box back onto the viewer. Does this physical reflection induce psychological or intellectual reflection? It is interesting to note that in an exhibition of these photographs in Germany, someone threw a large stone through one of the light boxes – destroying both the light box and the image. The resulting photos of the damage are powerful in themselves.

### **Major Signification**

The meaning of “stone” is at the heart of this photograph. In the Palestinian context, “stone” acts as a symbol of both resistance and futility. Western media often show Palestinians throwing stones at the armed forces of the Israeli army, in a futile attempt to stop them or at least to slow them down. This representation relates back to Sisyphus’s futile endeavour of rolling a stone up a hill. In addition, the stones in this image are not on the ground but ‘in transit,’ and are obviously too large to handle with bare hands. Both the weightiness and apparent transience add to the interpretations of displacement, journey and futility.

The khaffiya represents a sense of identity. As such, this symbol has become one of fear and terrorism in its own right. As Western viewers, we must locate ourselves “within the ethnocentrism and cultural blindness of a narrow range of meanings that the image ...

stimulates” (Trifonas, p. 19). In fact, Al-Ghoussein encountered this narrow meaning after spending many hours in a Jordanian police station being questioned about his ‘motives’ for photographing himself (for this series) wrapped in the scarf looking across the Dead Sea toward Palestine. The Jordanian authorities themselves (similar to those in the West) had taken the scarf as a symbol of terrorism.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1981) discusses the *punctum* of a photograph, referring “to the notion of punctuation, because ... photographs ... are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; ... for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole. ... A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (pp. 26-27). My own *punctum* in this image is the figure’s bare hand. For me, and within the context of the photo series, the bare hand is ready to ‘bear stones.’ In discussions with the artist, however, he noted that he had not considered the bare hand an important element within the photograph. This “accidental punctuation” is therefore entirely my own interpretation.

A similar subjective interpretation is articulated by another (Western) viewer, who sees the figure in the image walking to the left. To him, this ‘direction’ speaks about resistance with a certain element of built-in defeat. The figure is going back, going into the myth, going against the grain. This, of course, is an interpretation based on Western values of “left” and “right.” Would the Arab ‘read’ this in the same way?

Additionally, a student observer in New Zealand commented that “[i]n Christian symbolism rocks have always stood for solidity, a strong foundation or base. In a quirk of semantics, this is the very thing that Israel and Palestine are both fighting for. Thus, this is perhaps a pertinent example that specific cultural knowledge is needed for the interpretation of symbols within art” (Read, p. 4).

### **Aesthetic Valuation**

What aesthetic value do viewers ascribe to this image? How do they ‘see’ it? For Robins, “[t]here is the question of what is screened, and, even more importantly, there is the question of what is screened out” (p. 6). Al-Ghoussein intentionally ‘screens out’ the “shock” and “horror”

of the conflict that is often portrayed in the media with sensationalist photos of death, despair and destruction, and instead allows a screening that is aesthetically pleasing.

In Robins' argument against the "wishful idealisation" that technology is believed to be "inherently liberating," he proposes instead that "[l]ike Richard Kearney, ... we must learn 'to discriminate between a liberating and incarcerating use of images, between those that dis-close and those that close off our relation to the other, those that democratise culture and those that mystify it, those that communicate and those that manipulate'. The crucial thing is to make distinctions and judgements in thinking about new images (as we should about old ones too)" (p. 7). He further includes the distinctions between "engagement and disengagement," "representation and misrepresentation," and "reflection and fiction" (p. 7).

How well does Al-Ghoussein's use of this image (through both the "old" medium of photography and the "new" technology of digitized images exhibited in a non-traditional fashion) mediate these oppositions? The dialectic between these pairs is evident in Al-Ghoussein's aesthetics, as noted by a number of viewers and reviewers, including myself.

- Al-Ghoussein invites the viewer to engage with the image, the idea, and the myth. At the same time, the non-Palestinian viewer is necessarily disengaged from the actual experience represented.
- "Sometimes, he positions the viewer close to the action, so that we gaze over his shoulder. Other times, he seems oblivious to our surveillance and we are separated by great space. ... His refusal to be imprisoned within [the stereotype] allows us to re-view the subject with greater empathy and we too are broken free from its limitations" (Hawker, 2003).
- Al-Ghoussein "does not close down or confine readings of the works or encourage an overtly political response" (Symonds, p. 2). At the same time, "Tarek's world invites you to watch, but access is restricted. Occupied territory" (Giesen).
- "Given the current political climate, it's all too easy to relate these images entirely to the world of politics rather than aesthetics. But the huge, almost lifesize, light boxes are accomplished, narrative artworks. They set up layers of intrigue. They revel in colour and texture" (Carver). At once, they democratize and mystify and aestheticize.

- The images communicate a sense of the struggle in an ambiguous and unassuming fashion while at the same time suggesting a particular interpretation. Although not overtly manipulative, the viewer is guided by the suggestion in the image and has his/her interpretation reflected back upon him/herself.
- “In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes speaks of being emotionally touched by a detail in a photograph. He says that photographs ‘work within him’, as a silent and unselfconscious process. In this case, emotions become dissociated from the original representation, or even of its political reference to which they were first attached. These images give rise to an inexplicable feeling and the workings of the unconscious, [and are] not confined to a dream but ... pervade our waking life” (Katodrytis, 2003).
- At the end of the VPRO TV production, the following conversation occurs:
  - Narrator: “Why do you portray yourself as a terrorist?”
  - Al-Ghoussein: “Am I a terrorist?”
  - Narrator: “Aren’t you?”
  - Al-Ghoussein: “No. Just a man dressed in black with his head wrapped in a scarf.”

The twinkle in Al-Ghoussein’s eye while he says this indicates, of course, that he is well aware of what the figure would and does represent, but he pointed again to the question, the ambiguity, the duality present in the images – that of the (mis)representation of Palestinian as terrorist.

## Summary

“[T]he viewer of the image *receives at one and the same time* the perceptual [coded iconic] message and the cultural [non-coded iconic] message” (Barthes, 1977, p. 137). Both messages are screened by and interpreted through the viewer’s own perceptual and cultural biases. What is needed and often lacking, is a way to ‘translate’ what one sees into the cultural language in which it was originally ‘spoken.’ “It’s a problem ... of translation, of translating what is expressed in one language ... into expression in a different language” (Lévi-Strauss, 1979, p. 9).

The cultural coding inherent in this photograph is at once recognizable, and yet often does not ‘translate’ well when interpreted by those outside of the Palestinian experience/culture. Viewers

will engage with and interpret the image within the cultural and perceptual boundaries of their own experience, but remain disengaged from the experience represented there. I can think of no other group of people at this time in history that identifies so clearly with the Sisyphean futility portrayed in this series. The futility and the inherent longing for place has become the Palestinian identity; it is a way of life and provides a cultural identity in place of a grounded, fixed national identity.

“This is the originality of mythical thinking – to play the part of conceptual thinking” (Lévi-Strauss, p. 22). All we can do is to enter into the myth, to conceptualize the experience, to interpret and find meaning in images, to question our own biases and perceptions of stereotype and to perhaps ultimately find a level of meaning in the lives of others that infuse and inform and deepen our own.

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