

**Dorot Ruth**

(Ariel)

## **THE OVERT AND COVERT CHAGALL<sup>\*)</sup>**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, the authors chooses the theory of metarealism as a tool to reveal the worlds of Marc Chagall – the physical and metaphysical ones which function simultaneously. The purpose behind it is to help readers discover Chagall's magical, mysterious and mystical environments which he so adroitly conveyed via his colourful creations. For this end, I analyzed three of his well-known paintings, each of which helped uncover his world of harsh reality merged with his life of fantasy, both spiced with symbolism.

### **Key words**

Chagall, shtetl, real-fantastic, symbolism, floating-hovering, archetype, metarealism

---

<sup>\*)</sup> This article was edited by Nili Laufert

Were I not a Jew, I would not have become an artist<sup>1</sup>

Marc Chagall said.

Marc Chagall born in 1887 and died at the age of 98 in 1985, was a pioneer of modern art, a poet of colors, a painter of joy and optimism, a dreamer, the most famous and celebrated Jewish artist and one who achieved worldwide recognition during his own lifetime. Chagall and his art constitute a magical world of realism and fantasy. On the one hand, he depicts the history of the Jews in Eastern Europe while on the other he captures the uniqueness and magic of the Jewish existence. His works are full of whimsical ideas, freshness, humor, beauty, sometimes mystery, the supernatural and a nostalgic dimension as well. However, above all, they are works of originality and invention, of images – simple and symbolic – born out of his fertile imagination which surpasses all boundaries and conventions in terms of color, space and time. In a unique manner, Chagall merged his novel concepts with the Russian folkloristic influence (Loboc) and his Jewish roots to create a distinctive style which portrays fiddlers on roofs, floating fish and upside-down figures, which has its own visual language of color, one that is his alone – readily identifiable.

As with most of the master-artists of the twentieth century, he combined Expressionism, Realism, Cubism, Surrealism, Fauvism and the abstract into a modern ensemble in wonderful and surprising creations that merge his town, Vitebsk, with his later adopted home, Paris. This combination yields folklore underlying which there are profound philosophical ideas ranging from the complex and the covert to the naïve and refined all at once.

The theory of Metarealism was originally intended to analyze twentieth-century literature, with Kafka and Camus being the most prominent examples. In Hebrew literature, S.I. Agnon is the greatest Metarealistic author, one who greatly influenced all subsequent Hebrew writers. This theory can be as relevant a tool to be applied to the analysis of art as well – especially Chagall's. Metarealism has its origins in Metamaterialism, the term coined by Felix Welch in his book about Kafka's religiosity and humor in his life and work, where he uses the term to denote Kafka's observation of the material world. Hillel Barzel writes about the physical and the metaphysical and shows that a Metarealistic work observes both worlds simultaneously. It deals both

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Chagall, *Leaves from My Notebook*, [in:] B. Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times – A Documentary Narrative*, Stanford 2004, p. 160.

with the earthly reality and at the same time with the transcendental. This style of writing and painting has recognizable features which can appear in a number of variations and can be divided into four major categories, each of which can be divided into sub-categories: A. Extreme inventiveness and imagination combined with a strict adherence to facts and reality. B. A link to a metaphysical sphere; C. Symbolic and allegorical elements; D. Inscrutability<sup>2</sup>.

Chagall's lyrical visions enabled him to perceive the universe to be metaphorical, mysterious and magical. He compared his soul to something lighter than a flame, lighter than a shadow. There are images in his works in which everything merges, in which the spiritual world blends with the material world. As for Chagall himself, when asked why he painted certain things as he did, his response was: „...to make fantastic elements appear beside realistic elements”<sup>3</sup>.

Metarealistic works are by nature enigmatic and the reader/observer will retain some feeling of mystery at the end of the work which adds a new layer of interpretation, helping to attain a more profound appreciation of the work in question.

The purpose of this article is to emphasize the subject of Judaism in Chagall's paintings – a central and inseparable part of his artistic world. This will be achieved by examining three of the artist's well-known paintings, created during his early period in Paris, when he profoundly missed and longed for his homeland. Each of the chosen works emphasizes a different archetypal theme: The wandering Jew; the continuation of Jewish survival and existence; Chagall's self-portrait as a Jewish painter.

### OVER VITEBSK 1914

One of Chagall's favorite and most prominent themes is the Jewish world, which appears in his early works from the years 1907-1922, but also in his later works. The figure of the Jew is a central one in many of his paintings, which depict both: the day-to-day Jewish experience as well as its more festive occasions. At the heart of this painting, the Jew is portrayed against a backdrop of the cold, snowy winter, the bleak reality, the surroundings and this alienating world of the Diaspora.

---

<sup>2</sup>H. Barzel, *Metarealistic Hebrew Prose*, Ramat Gan 1974, p.12.

<sup>3</sup>A. Kamensky, *Chagall – The Russian Years 1907-1922*, London 1989, p. 135.

In the 1914 painting, we see the oversized, massive but weightless figure of the timeless wandering Jew – the „Luftmensch” – a rootless peddler who has no steady job or profession and is not permitted to be a farmer or a landowner. The „Luftmensch” – a frequent metaphor used by anti-Semites when referring to the Jew – meaning “living in the air”, ordinarily sells his merchandise going from door to door, but here he is, defying, suspending the law of gravitation while hovering above the houses of the snowy village<sup>4</sup>. This is the typical Jew, easily recognizable by his beard, side locks, his cap and traditional long coat, all of which suggest his ethnic affiliation. He carries on his back a sack, a brown bundle – the *peckale* – containing buttons, needles, threads, shoelaces, scissors and the like, but metaphorically it contains the poverty, the troubles and hardships that are both personal and general to the Diaspora Jew<sup>5</sup>. The bundle symbolizes the pressing burdens of daily life and the floating – the archetypal wandering of the Jew. This „bundle” is so central to Jewish life that it becomes part of the body, turning the Jew into a kind of hunchback. His burden weighs heavily upon him, and this is why his body is tilting forward, and he must support himself with the walking stick, in his other hand. Beneath him, the glistening white snow spreads its cold reality<sup>6</sup>. The houses, the fences and even the town buildings are geometric in design. The crooked roofs, the naked trees and the fences are pointed and alienating. The windows of those buildings seem like unfriendly eyes, which add to the Jew’s sense that he is being watched as an outsider feeling all alone in all of this.

Above all these fierce and piercing conditions, the Jew hovers almost entirely against the background of the open sky, transcending the conditions of the town’s existence in wartime. The winter landscape is transformed into a magical scene. The floating figure was to become a frequent theme in Chagall’s work, in which rational and perceptible reality blended with dreams and memories to produce a reality heightened by imaginative vision. Thus,

---

<sup>4</sup>Chagall did several versions of „Over Vitebsk” in 1914 and later, and from then on the motif of the human figure floating above the landscape often figured in his work. F. Meyer, *Marc Chagall*, New York 1964, p. 222.

<sup>5</sup>„The nomad’s pack (...) is a symbol of the «unproductive» existence of the Jews, their beggars’ predicament, their essentially parasitic and «unreal» peddler life. Over-lapping the image of the «Wandering Jew» going into exile (...). The «eternal Jew» is a mythical figure, condemned to exile, yet eternal”. B. Harshav, *Marc Chagall and the Lost Jewish World*, New York 2007, p. 131.

<sup>6</sup>„(...) the old beggar who walks above the snow-covered velvety town is the eternal Wandering Jew (...) transforms the landscape from the commonplace to the mystical”. J. Wullschlager, *Chagall*, New York 2008, p. 185.

this is where we see the humor, the criticism, the poetry and the inventiveness that are typical of Chagall, and we wonder what it all means. Is it an illusion? A fantasy? The truth, perhaps? In his own surrealist manner, Chagall portrays an individual Jew, while continuing to be a representative – an archetype. He is the Jew who symbolizes the suffering, the detachment – the lack of a homeland; but spiritually, he is far above these severe circumstances, mostly in the poetic heavens. The Jew turns his back on the buildings – the establishment – and the church. One foot partly touches the roofs of the village houses, while the other is already above them as he turns to the skies – to the spiritual world. Even though in front of him there is a kind of a diagonal dark cloud, suggesting possible drama and further trials and tribulations in the future, the spiritual has nevertheless defeated the material! And so Chagall, waving his „magic wand” – the brush – enables the „Luftmensch” to soar above the distressing situation turning it from earthly to heavenly, making the skies his domain by means of his devout faith in God. The persecuted Jew is elated, exhilarated, elevated to a degree of supreme spiritual exaltation.

### THE CATTLE DEALER 1912

A procession consisting of a dealer, his wife with a calf around her neck, a cart, a cow and a mare is in progress. This entire scene addresses the continuity and the survival of the Jewish existence. In many of Chagall's paintings, as has been indicated, the starting point is a presentation of reality<sup>7</sup> intermingled with imagination, humor and magic, all of which embody an aspect that is symbolic<sup>8</sup>, archetypal or mystical. Symbolically speaking, in „The Cattle Dealer”, a many-layered painting, the observer is left puzzled even after a thorough examination and analysis.

Despite all the deciphering, there is a sense of enigma, surprise and wonderment.

Here the dealer is travelling to market to sell or slaughter the animal, or alternatively fleeing a stressful or dismal environment, looking back in fright

---

<sup>7</sup>J. Sweeney, *Marc Chagall*, New York 1969, p. 26. In his book on Chagall, Sweeney claims that this painting was inspired by Chagall's memories of his youth when travelling with his uncle Noah by cart to buy cattle.

<sup>8</sup>One can see that Chagall's works are densely populated with symbols which the painter fashions to meet his needs, giving them his own content which often contradict the original meaning. In this manner he turns symbols of Jewish and Christian-European culture into symbols of his own. D. Landau, *From Metaphor to Symbol*, Ramat Gan 1979, p. 202.

and panic. The figure of the dealer is realistic and individual but at the same time it typifies the inhabitants of a *shtetl* – the Jewish village<sup>9</sup>.

The picture is neither decorative nor just a Diasporic folklore of the *shtetl*. It is a symbolic<sup>10</sup> event conveying the condition and fate of the Jew. The Jewish theme is indicated by the white square with slats, worn by the Jewish dealer, placed in the front of his jacket representing the „Tallit Katan”. It is also indicated by the white rectangular shape on the mare’s back, as well as the colored stripes, all of which are reminiscent of the prayer shawl known as the „Tallit” and the black and white lines on its harness. The mare has a „mane” with „curls” down the side that look like fringes of a „Tallit”. Within the somber and depressing reality – expressed by the dark night – seeds of hope are sown by Chagall in a magical way via the „Ultra Sound”. Being a „prophetic painter” in this case, he used in 1912 a magical technique hitherto unknown to science.

Purity and spirituality are introduced by the white color of the mare, an animal possessing human qualities shown by her large expressive eye. The mare is obviously gravid with the visible fruit of her womb – the foal – inside her transparent abdomen<sup>11</sup>, suggesting hope, salvation and continuity of the Jewish nation. In its path, though, it will be challenged by perils and pogroms, bloody conflicts and confrontations, now merely hinted at by the red coloring of the mare.

The Realism of the subject on the one hand and its unrealistic design on the other are what make it a symbolic archetype linked to both the physical and the metaphysical: the theme of the painting – the convoy, the walking, the people and the animals – is all part of the former; however, the way Chagall portrays them for instance the fetus in the transparent womb, are all indicative of the latter. The fetus clearly stands for the newborn, that is the future, the Promise of that nation.

---

<sup>9</sup> „Chagall’s Jews are symbolic, transcendental figures because they are also modern, ironic ones, distorted by sharp contrasts (...) and defined by flamboyant non-naturalistic color that gives each picture its special tone”. J. Wullschlager, Chagall, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> „Chagall’s «Cattle Dealer» is not only a vivid depiction of rural life in Russia at the turn of the century but also a symbolic picture on many levels”. J. Baal-Teshuva, Marc Chagall, Köln 2000, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Chagall constructed his animals – usually outside their realistic context of function – as part of his culturally stereotyped but private fictional universe, never explicitly explained and never univalent. Animals for him could represent the warmth and endearing quality of a living being, symbolize the emotional but inarticulate impact of non-verbal communication or epitomize the ideal of humans living in close contact with nature. B. Harshav, Marc Chagall and the Lost Jewish World, p. 63.

**SELF-PORTRAIT WITH SEVEN FINGERS 1912**

As one would expect of a good self-portrait, in this work Chagall documents the external features and the inner traits: his appearance, his sensitivity and innermost thoughts. He depicts himself in one of the most crucial phases of both his personal and professional life: his transition from Vitebsk in White Russia to Paris – the art center of the world at that time. He presents himself as a Jewish artist when he places behind him – on either side of his head – two Yiddish words inscribed in Hebrew script: Russia and Paris, which stand for the two poles of his personal and artistic life, two cultures, two different life-styles that together constitute the core of his existence. The words function to associate him with his Jewish identity<sup>12</sup>.

Chagall's internal discords of a modern twentieth-century painter and a Jewish artist torn between two worlds, are expressed in the exaggerated facial features. The focus of his inner turmoil is the choice he has to make between the past and the present. Vitebsk, with which the painter's entire being is preoccupied, is etched in his heart. It is his memories, his childhood, the place to which his entire inner spiritual life is connected. One cannot help but sense his nostalgic yearning for his past. It is the emotional and inspirational source of his work, whereas Paris means the most to him physically and professionally.

The multi-colored self-portrait is not an accurate reflection of objective reality<sup>13</sup>; it is by no means a photograph, but rather an image infused with dream-like qualities and motifs, an imaginary self-portrait surrounded by memories and visions that lie somewhere between fact and fantasy of a sophisticated, elegant, modern painter – a cubist with the distortions inherent in that style as *that* is how he wished to be perceived.

---

<sup>12</sup> „Chagall went to Paris in August 1910, absorbing fauve color and cubist faceting into his 'folk' style. He redid his major Russian Jewish works in his new French style (...) He expressed his multifaceted identity in «Self-portrait with Seven Fingers» (...) in this painting he encapsulated the identity crisis many newly emancipated Jewish artists expressed in their works”. Z. Amishai-Meisels, *The Jewish Awakening: A Search for National Identity, Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change 1890-1990*, Munich-New York 1990, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> „The artist distinguishes between three levels of reality in the painting (...) «true» reality: the world which can be glimpsed through the window – where the city of Paris is depicted (...) the second level of reality is embodied in (...) the remembered image of Vitebsk, rising up in his mind's eye (...) depicted here enveloped in clouds and floating in space. The third reality is manifested in the painting resting on the easel (...) in the artist's imagination and is given concrete expression in his artistic creation (...)” M. Friedman, *Icon Paintings and Russian Popular Art as Sources of Some Works by Chagall*, *Journal of Jewish Art* 5, 1987, pp. 106-107.

The figure in the painting had been distorted through the use of the modern styles, as mentioned before. In relation to the height of the painting, the length of the body is highly exaggerated and disproportional to its other parts. And so, Chagall stresses his own importance as man and artist; he constitutes the center of the painting and the world he is depicting. He is presenting himself as a Magician Painter by endowing himself with two right hands – to draw attention to his skill – and he also adds two extra fingers to what is supposedly his left hand<sup>14</sup>. With that he is guarding one of his own previous works<sup>15</sup>. This addition of the two digits – making it 7 – intends to emphasize the hand's value as the deliverer of his special skill and abundant talent<sup>16</sup>, which can only be possessed by a creative artist who differs from ordinary mortals in this respect. According to a Yiddish idiom *mit alle zibn finger* (with all seven fingers), doing something with seven fingers means doing it well.

It is common knowledge that the number 7 has a special mystical significance in the Jewish tradition, in the Kabbalah and in the Bible, correlating strongly with the concept of Creation. The Kabbalists see it as representing the unlimited spirituality in Creation and Man and – as such – expressing the fact that it is the force which moves Matter. The examples are too numerous to list here, but a few should suffice: the three fathers and four mothers in the Bible gave birth to the Jewish nation; the 7 days of Creation; the 7 candles in the *Menorah*; the 7 good years and the 7 bad ones according to Joseph's interpretation of the dream with the 7 fat and 7 lean cows; Jericho was fortified, and only after being surrounded 7 times did the wall fall in as many days.

Chagall considered the number 7 to be a lucky and magical number for him personally, since *his* date of birth was the seventh day of the seventh month of the year 1887.

---

<sup>14</sup> Chagall maintained: „I consciously seek (...) to construct a world where a tree can be different, where I myself can suddenly discover that I have seven fingers on my right hand, but only five on my left – basically a world where everything is possible”. J. Baal-Teshuva, Marc Chagall, p. 206.

<sup>15</sup> „«Russia, Asses and Others» is a milestone in Chagall's creative work, it is the first of his works in which the cosmos becomes the setting for the action (...) it opens a new dimension (...) none of Chagall's previous works so closely combined both the everyday and the fantastic”. A. Kamensky, Chagall – The Russian Years 1907-1922, London 1989, p. 104.

<sup>16</sup> „The «Self-portrait with Seven Fingers» affirms the artist's ability to transfigure reality: a transfiguration that firstly touches the actual hand of the artist whose powers seem thus multiplied”. M. Makarius, Chagall, Paris 1987 p. 62.



## CONCLUSION

Chagall convincingly and imaginatively embraces and preserves the old world – its way of life, its stories, the streets and characters. The world he had physically left behind remained an integral part of his internal truth, as a memory and a feeling expressed in his art. Alongside the daily complex life, hope springs up between the hardships – stemming from the transcendental, mystical aspect of life, providing refuge from the plights of the present and tightly tied to the magic and to the cosmic logic of the Creator. Hence, the artist moves freely between daily existence and a yearning for redemption when one will be able to rise above the alienated and alienating real world.

### **Dorot Ruth** **CHAGALL JAWNY I UKRYTY**

#### **Streszczenie**

Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą ukazania niepowtarzalnego charakteru sztuki Marca Chagalla, jednego z największych i najsłynniejszych żydowskich artystów XX w., który w swoich dziełach łączył elementy rzeczywistości i świata fantazji. Na podstawie konkretnych przykładów, autorka pokazuje, że obrazy Chagalla poddają się jednoczesnemu czytaniu na dwóch poziomach – realnym i nadprzyrodzonym.

Marc Chagall uobecnia w obrazach swoje życie osobiste i artystyczne, splatając je z wątkami z życia i losami wschodnioeuropejskich Żydów. W jego ujęciu codzienne życie i niezwykle sytuacje stają się głęboko indywidualne a jednocześnie zyskują archetypiczny wymiar.

Chagall łączy swoje żydowskie korzenie z wpływami rosyjskiej sztuki ludowej i stylistyką awangardy z początku XX w., z jaką zetknął się w Paryżu, ówczesnej stolicy sztuki. W ten sposób powstaje swoista, Chagallowska mieszanka symboliczna, której nie sposób nie rozpoznać. Jej znanymi elementami są unoszące się, zawieszony postacie, a zwłaszcza jednoczesna obecność elementów realnych i surrealistycznych. Świat tworzony przez Chagalla jest uniwersum magii i wyobraźni, które współistnieją z osobistym i historycznym dokumentem.

Over Vitebsk, 1914

Source [online]. Dustin Keirstead  
[access: 2016-12-06]. Available at:  
<<http://dustinkeirstead.blogspot.co.il/2014/04/art-gallery-of-ontario-toronto-march-2.html>>



The Cattle Dealer, 1912

Source [online]. Wikiart  
[access: 2016-12-06]. Available at:  
<<https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall>>



Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers, 1912

Source [online]. Wikiart  
[access: 2016-12-06]. Available at:  
<<https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall>>



**Bibliography**

- Amishai-Meisels Z., *The Jewish Awakening: A Search for National Identity, Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change 1890-1990*, Munich-New York 1990.
- Baal-Teshuva J., *Marc Chagall*, Köln 2000.
- Barzel H., *Metarealistic Hebrew Prose*, Ramat Gan 1974.
- Chagall M., *Leaves from My Notebook*, [in:] B. Harshav's *Marc Chagall and His Times – A Documentary Narrative*, Stanford 2004, pp. 70-169.
- Friedman M., *Icon Paintings and Russian Popular Art as Sources of Some Works by Chagall*, *Journal of Jewish Art* 5, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 106-107.
- Harshav B., *Marc Chagall and the Lost Jewish World*, New York 2007.
- Kamensky A., *Chagall – The Russian Years 1907-1922*, London 1989.
- Landau D., *From Metaphor to Symbol*, Ramat Gan 1979.
- Makarius M., *Chagall*, Paris 1987.
- Meyer F., *Marc Chagall*, New York 1964.
- Sweeney J., *Marc Chagall*, New York 1969.
- Wullschlager J., *Chagall*, New York 2008.