



BEHOLD THE SPLENDOR OF MALKA*

By Juli Carson

Why Malka Now?

I'll begin with three *mise-en-scènes*.

In *The Book of Malka Germania*—Yael Bartana's exhibition catalog for her retrospective *Redemption Now* at the Jewish Museum, Berlin—Malka Germania is presented as an allegorical figure for the *vox populi*, representing all things for all people. The imaginary *mise-en-scène* that structures the book is a crowd both cheering and booing her, the chapters titled: “She is Hope,” “She is the Leader,” “She is the Messiah,” “She is History,” “She is Fake.” Simply, Malka Germania is the sum total of us all, which makes her the androgenous messianic figure that she is.¹ Hence our first scene.

In *Malka Germania*, the video installation, this same messianic figure arrives in Berlin on a donkey—attended by apparitions of athletes, dancers, a wandering camel, and soldiers evoking the Israeli Defense Force—provoking the transfer of the city from the stewardship of Berliners to the Jewish Diaspora. German street signs are swapped out for Hebrew ones, while Nordic artifacts and vestiges are thrown from apartment windows onto the street. Berliners—now the dispossessed—crowd into a train station, suitcases in hand, while the video's denouement offers Malka Germania standing on the Wannsee Lake shoreline as Albert Speer's model of Germania rises from the water like the lost city of Atlantis. Notably, this is the real-life location of the Wannsee Conference held by Nazi elite on January 20, 1942 to coordinate the “Final Solution to the Jewish Problem.” Next year will be the conference's 80th anniversary. Hence our second scene.

The third *mise-en-scène* is our real-world present. With the meteoric rise of global autocracies, collapsing financial markets, ever-mutating pandemics, catastrophic climate change, and the looming demise of the American experiment, apparently the end days are here, again. And when the end days arrive, so does the collective drive for a savior. Of course, all doctrines of Abrahamic Messianism—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—begin and end with an impending catastrophe, in that Messianism is at heart an eschatological doctrine. But this drive for salvation is not singularly primitive nor modern. Nor is it religious, per se. The same impulse—the need for a Master—drives secular revolutions as well.



The Other Side

A brief detour to 1960s France.

In *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (1969-1970), Jacques Lacan was formulating his schemata of the Subject's “four discourses”—that of the University, Master, Hysteric, and Analyst—which respectively accords with four social phenomenon: educating, governing, protesting, and revolutionizing.² A bootleg transcript of the Seminar gives us a confrontation—redacted in Jacques Alain Miller's official publication—between Lacan and a student, who argue over the value of teaching psychoanalysis in the University when revolutions were swirling all around them:

Student: While this class drones quietly on, there are 150 comrades from Beaux-Arts who were arrested by the cops and who since yesterday have been at Beaujon because they are not giving classes on the ‘objet a’ like this mandarin here... So I think that the droning on of this formal class is a fairly good expression of the current state of rottenness in the University.

*Lacan: The configuration of Workers and Peasants has all the same led to a form of society in which it is precisely the University that is in the driving seat... [T]he revolutionary aspiration has only one possible way of ending, only one: always with the discourse of the Master... What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a Master. You shall have one!*³

By connecting the revolutionary drive to both the discourse of the University (the domain of unquestioned knowledge) and the Master (the domain of shameless certitude), Lacan denaturalized the idea that direct opposition was the way out of universal truth claims proffered by the Master's discourse. Because revolutionaries—be they the “worker,” “feminist,” “nationalist,” or what have you—are by definition just as certain of themselves—in the totality of their being—as the Masters they seek to topple. In the transhistorical cycle of revolutions and redemption, it appears to be Masters all the way down.

With *Malka Germania* we're offered a way out of this tyrannical spiral because through such artwork we can envision change less polemically and more obliquely. As Bartana put it, “That's the power of art: We can imagine what politics can't.”⁴ This brings us to Lacan's other two discourses: the Hysteric



and the Analyst, which are to be found everywhere in Malka Germania. The Hysteric's discourse is the precise inverse of the Master's because the Hysteric is over-determined by their lack-of-being in language—and by extension culture—while the Master is completely oblivious to such lack. Accordingly, the Hysteric's discourse is a critical transition to that of the Analyst, who, in turn, guides the Hysteric to look straight into the hole from which the Master's certitude gushes, which is to say, at the repressed shame regarding the Master's own lack-of-being. Psychoanalytically speaking, this is the stage upon which Malka Germania—the Messiah-Hysteric brainchild of the Artist-Analyst Bartana—performs the task of navigating us through culture's repressed historical fantasies. Perhaps it is *there*, on that aesthetic stage, that we might find some social (re)imagination.

Malka is Coming!

Let's begin again, with the city of *Atlantis*.

Derived by Plato around 360 B.C. as a foreboding parable against aggressive forms of imperialism, *Atlantis* was said to have sunk to the bottom of the ocean some 9000 years prior to the Athenian's time. It was, of course, just a legend. That is, until 1882 when an American former congressman, Ignatius Donnelly, made the case for its existence in his best-selling book *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*. From there, *Atlantis* was deployed as a grift by cranks on every side of the political spectrum, a screen upon which to project one's own “lost civilization” brought down at its height by civil war. The grift met its darkest hour in 1935 when Heinrich Himmler founded *Ahnenerbe*, the Nazi think tank that promoted *Atlantis* as the first Nordic Empire from which the Third Reich (and a pure Aryan race) could trace its lineage. All this is what *Malka Germania*'s denouement evokes, the Messiah Queen standing on the shores of Wannsee Lake as Speer's Germania hermeneutically communes, before our eyes, with Himmler's Atlantis.

Through Bartana's camera eye, the scene evokes a kind of pre-enactment of a horrific anterior future, a utopia-driven dystopia lying on the horizon. It's a cinematic visualization of our all-too-common compulsion to re-enact past collective trauma precisely by way of seeking redemption from it, rather

Images: Yael Bartana, *Malka Germania*, 2021, video still, courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv; Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milano; Petzel Gallery, New York; and Captain Petzel, Berlin.

than working through it.⁵ But as Freud famously warned, *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*, which Lacan interpreted as, *Where it was, there I shall become*. Meaning, we can't just turn away from the world any more than we can simply "turn the page" and move on. Whenever we think we're done with our dystopian past—without first working through it as did Germany with the Nuremberg Trials in 1946 and South Africa with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1995—it returns as the underside of attempts at revolution and redemption, no matter how well-intentioned the participants. Witness the Jacobin's Reign of Terror, as the tactical "other side" of the French Revolution's goal of establishing *liberté, égalité, fraternité*; the Israeli-driven Nakba, the 1948 exodus of more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs from ancestral lands as the tactical means of realizing Theodor Herzl's dream of a Jewish State; and the U.S. trifecta of Native American genocide, African enslavement, and Japanese nuclear holocaust initiated by a nation at war as a means of establishing and maintaining universal franchisement. Or, less horrifically, simply look at the internet in terms of the original dream of global communication it afforded vis-à-vis the pernicious tribalism it has produced.

This is the kind of irresolvable, internal contradiction that *Malka Germania* embodies, denoting at once a messianic figure and a contemporary film, a myth and a reality. It might be more accurate, then, to think of Malka Germania as not, not myth. From this perspective, *Malka Germania* would present a kind of heterology—in Georges Bataille's conception—composed of heterogeneous elements that are impossible to assimilate into one masterful whole. As Bataille notes, heterology's affect is therefore wide ranging: "Depending on the person, heterogeneous elements will provoke affective reactions of varying intensity... There is sometimes attraction, sometimes repulsion, and in certain circumstance, any object of repulsion can become an object of attraction and vice versa."⁶ Correspondingly, this brings us back to Lacan's Analyst and Master paradigms, because the Analyst, whose discourse pivots off the Hysteric's, has the task of paradoxically proffering up lack as a thing to "see"—*a hole is a thing in something it is not*—as a means of exposing the Master's tyrannical aim of promoting self-same wholeness, or, homogeneity. From there we can see that our Messiahs—just like our Masters—are as sacred as they are profane, which is the more radical way of engaging their eternal return.

Redemption Redeemed

Since there's no way out of the Master's discourse or our pursuit of redemption and revolution in catastrophic times, the question becomes: How to cut across the false choice between either succumbing to the Master's tyranny or falling into the Hysteric's outsidersness. Again, this entails engaging mythic knowledge of the world, from an oblique, relational perspective, against the Cartesian scientific knowledge of the world (alone). This further entails what I'm now positing, in homage of Lacan, as the discourse of the Analyst-Artist. Returning to Bracher: "The analytic discourse... makes it possible to produce a master signifier that is a little less oppressive, because it is a different style, a style that, we might surmise, is less absolute, exclusive and rigid in its establishment of the subject's identity, and more open, fluid, processual—constituted, in a word, by

relativity and textuality."⁷ In Bartana's Analyst-Artist's discourse, Malka Germania—as not, not myth—gives us a glimpse at what abandoning the collective will of mastery over our anxiety, shame, desire, and symptom might produce: a fluid Messiah who opposes all oppositions. And in that formless world of infinite equivalence, redemption for one is redemption for all.

Be careful what you wish for!

- 1 Yael Bartana, *The Book of Germania*, Shelley Harten and Gregor H. Lersch eds., (Berlin: The Jewish Museum, 2020), pp. 11-14.
- 2 Mark Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses," in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, Society*, Mark Bracher, (NY: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 107-127.
- 3 https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XVII_L_envers_de_la_P.pdf, pp. 7-8.
- 4 Emily Rappaport, "Yael Bartana on Israel, the Myths Underlying Nation States, and Being a Political Artist," *Artsy*, September 9, 2015.
- 5 See: Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, Working Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)," in James Stachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XII, London 1958, pp. 147-156.
- 6 Georges Bataille, "The Structure of Fascism," in *The Bataille Reader*, Fred Botting and Scott Wilson eds., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 127.
- 7 Bracher, p. 124.

* In memory of Igal Silber

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