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. 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… [The 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!]

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.” 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, to 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 aggregative 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 Germany 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 Capitain Petzel, Berlin.
than working through it. 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. triptych of Native American genocide, African enslavement, and Japanese nuclear holocaust inflated by a nation at war as a means of establishing and maintaining universal franchism. 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.” 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 outsiderness. 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.” 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!*