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AN ANALYSIS OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY MECHANISMS
AND THE AESTHETICS OF RITUALS
BASED ON *INFERNO* BY Yael BARTANA

Abstract. Yael Bartana, one of the most famous contemporary Israeli artists, explores the topic of shaping identity within the framework of contemporary policies to preserve the memory. When referring to the present, she does not forget about the past—the cultural heritage of her nation always underpins the presented film narratives. In her film *Inferno* (2013), the artist presents us with an evocative image, almost Hollywood-style in its framing and montage, of the future based on the myth of the Third Temple, which is important to the identity of the Jews. In this work, an important role is played by biblical symbols, religious rituals, mystical prophecies, contemporary Israeli society; it also includes an amazing but fully justifiable element—an innovative religious enterprise, which is a building called “New Jerusalem” in Brazil. The author of *Inferno* creates a social experiment with the help of the film, stages the reality within it, observes what is happening and finally “documents” it. This article is an attempt to analyse the subsequent layers of Bartana’s story, in order to take a detailed look at the artistic practice of the Israeli artist. I am interested in how she uses film art to explore the relationship between memory and events, places and objects, and how religious and social rituals can, in her view, shape collective memory. She wants her viewers to ask questions and reflect upon their own identity and history, which is largely based on narratives constructed by social rituals.

Keywords: Yael Bartana; Third Temple; New Jerusalem; collective memory

ANALIZA MECHANIZMÓW PAMIĘCI ZBIOROWEJ I ESTETYKI RYTUAŁU
NA PRZYKŁADZIE *INFERNO* Yael BARTANY

Abstrakt. Yael Bartana, jedna z najbardziej znanych współczesnych artystek z Izraela, w swoich realizacjach eksploruje temat kształtowania tożsamości w ramach funkcjonujących współcześnie polityk pamięci. Odnosząc się do teraźniejszości nie zapomina o przeszłości – kulturowe dziedzictwo jej narodu stanowi zawsze punkt wyjścia dla przedstawianych filmowych narracji.

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W *Inferno* (2013) artystka prezentuje nam sugestywny, wręcz hollywoodzki w kadrach i montażu obraz przyszłości oparty na ważnym dla tożsamości Żydów micie Trzeciej Świątyni. W filmie różnorodnie pełnią symbole biblijne, religijne rytuały, mistyczne proroctwa, współczesne izraelskie społeczeństwo, a także – co zadziwiające i w pełni uzasadnione – innowacyjne przedsiębiorstwo religijne budujące w Brazylii „Nową Jerozolimę”. Autorka *Inferno* tworzy za pomocą filmu społeczny eksperyment, inscenizuje w nim rzeczywistość, obserwuje, co się dzieje i na końcu to „dokumentuje”. Artykuł jest próbą analizy kolejnych warstw opowieści Bartana, aby przyjrzeć się praktyce artystycznej izraelskiej artystki. Interesuje mnie, w jaki sposób wykorzystuje ona środki sztuki filmowej do badania relacji między pamięcią a wydarzeniami, miejscami i przedmiotami oraz tego, jak religijne i społeczne rytuały kształtować mogą według niej pamięć zbiorową. Artystka pragnie, by jej widzowie zadawali pytania i zastanawiali się nad własną tożsamością i historią, która w dużej mierze opiera się na narracjach konstruowanych przez rytuały społeczne.

Słowa kluczowe: Yael Bartana; Trzecia Świątynia; Nowa Jerozolima; pamięć zbiorowa

INTRODUCTION

“What people experience in the present determines how they perceive the past and what they see in it,” argues Barbara Szacka, who was involved in research concerning collective memory.¹ Although the term “collective memory” is not fully unambiguous and various phenomena are analysed in light of its broad scope, it is worth considering the classical approach proposed by Maurice Halbwachs as a starting point.² This French sociologist dealt primarily with the mechanisms of the formation of individual memory in the social environment, but this eventually led him to formulate the foundations of the concept of collective memory. He perceived it as an image of the past, shared by members of a certain community, preserved by them, nurtured, and socially constructed through language, images³ and places. He argued that, in this context, the main function of remembering the past is

¹ Barbara Szacka, *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Scholars, 2006), 45.

² See Grażyna Gliwka, “Pamięć zbiorowa—jej funkcje i mechanizmy przekazu w kontekście badań Barbary Szackiej i Andrzeja Szpocińskiego,” *Rozprawy Społeczne/Social Dissertations* 13, no. 3 (2019): 13–27; Eliza Litak, “Pamięć jako ‘lustro i lampa’ tożsamości. Pamięć i tożsamość zbiorowa oraz wybrane aspekty relacji między nimi,” in *Pejzaże tożsamości: teoria i empiria w perspektywie interdyscyplinarnej*, ed. Eliza Litak, Renata Furman, and Hubert Bożek (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2011), 249–61. On Maurice Halbwachs’ theory see Astrid Erll, *Kultura pamięci. Wprowadzenie*, trans. Agata Teperek (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo UW, 2018), 32–38.

³ More or less in parallel to Halbwachs, the subject of the memory medium in art was dealt with directly by Aby Warburg, a German art historian and theorist. In his writings, he presented a long history of building up cultural layers and modifications in images (artistic representations); he then used the concept of “social memory” (*soziales Gedächtnis*).

that of shaping identity.⁴ He wrote, “Remembering is to a large extent a reconstruction of the past made using the information taken from the present, and in addition, a reconstruction preceded by other reconstructions from earlier periods in which the images of the past have already been distorted.”⁵ This clearly shows that any conscious reminiscence of the past is inextricably linked with the present. Due to the fact that the collective memory is focused on the present needs and interests of the group, it is created in a selective way, and therefore it is not constant, but dynamic and variable, it is like “a sphere of constant encounters, clashes, a blending of images from the past constructed from different elements”.⁶ As a result, “what is being remembered may be distorted and changed to the extent that it will be closer to fiction than to any bygone reality.”⁷

It may be assumed that the aforementioned mechanisms of the development of collective identity are uncovered and subsequently used in the works of Yael Bartana (b. 1970). She is one of the most famous contemporary Israeli artists, although at present she is professionally based mainly in Berlin and Amsterdam. She most often uses the medium of film, even though the purpose of her oeuvre is to explore how the past that remains in our consciousness changes and how it is “filtered” through the prism of the present, which I have attempted to demonstrate using the example of one of the most interesting and certainly the most “narrative” of her works. In her movie titled *Inferno* (2013), the artist presents us with an evocative image, almost Hollywood-style in its framing and montage, of the future based on the myth of the Third Temple, which is important to the Jewish identity. I selected this artist and this project for a reason. Bartana has been dealing with various ways of constructing and internalizing official narratives and images from the very beginning of her artistic path. Wherever she works—be it Israel, Poland, Brazil, or even Finland—she always delves into issues of identity politics and political imagination, and in the ways of including other possibilities within them. From my point of view, *Inferno* may be regarded as an example of a perfect illustration of the mechanisms which shape collective memory. This kind of memory is nourished by historical knowledge, which is used selectively as material for building the desired images of the past according to its own rules. In Bartana’s film, I think, there is the kind of

⁴ Erll, *Kultura pamięci*, 37.

⁵ Erll, 37.

⁶ Gliwka, “Pamięć zbiorowa,” 16.

⁷ Erll, *Kultura pamięci*, 37.

mythologization of the past that does not necessarily mean building a false image, but rather transformation of the values that sanction the behaviours and attitudes important for the life of the community as it exists today. This is interesting largely because in this work an equally important role is played by biblical symbols, religious Jewish rituals, mystical prophecies, contemporary Israeli society, and it includes an element which is amazing and yet fully justifiable—an innovative religious enterprise which is the building of so-called New Jerusalem in Brazil. Bartana takes us on an extremely interesting journey from Latin America to the Levant, where at the junction of Asia, Europe and Africa, there is only one such place on Earth, unlike any other, about which the movie characters could say that it is the one chosen by the Creator Himself above all others for the contemplation of His presence. Therefore, I am interested in how the Israeli artist uses the means of movie art to explore the relationship between memory and events, places and objects. What commemoration rituals does she evoke? How do identity-building practices connect, intersect, or perhaps contradict each other in this case? I attempt to answer this by analysing the subsequent layers of Bartana's film story, looking for the appropriate clues in Brazilian religiosity, Jewish rituals, the artist's biography and her method of artistic expression. In this context, I will also focus my attention on the aesthetic dimensions of the film, whose most important element is the Third Temple and the rituals evoked in its space. Indeed, in the visual spectacle that the Israeli artist offers us, she shifts from documenting reality to staging rituals and fictional events. This approach seems pertinent to the peculiarities of today's world, when the emphasis shifts from the discovery of phenomena and the study of their essence to the interpretation (or even multiple interpretations) that constructs the world. This process of aestheticization of knowledge also involves a way of thinking in which aesthetics includes anti-aesthetics, i.e. a critical attitude towards perception and feeling. Based on Bartana's proposed aesthetics of ritual, it is thus possible to recognise a multiplicity of real, possible, and made-up worlds. For myself, there is undoubtedly a continuity between art (and aesthetics) and ritual, so I will try to trace these connections as well.

INAUGURATION OF THE THIRD TEMPLE—SOLOMON'S TEMPLE

The narrative of *Inferno* is organized into three main sequences of images. The first one begins with spectacular aerial views, from the jungle, flying above apparently endless favelas and dense suburbs, ending up over stunning skyscrapers in the centre of a vast city. The sound of flying machines can be heard, their shadows and reflections flicker on the buildings as they pass by, revealing some objects suspended under their bellies. Then the action shifts to the streets and people begin to fill the screen. They are festively dressed, wearing white shirts or tunics, women with flowers in their hair, men carrying gifts, baskets of fruit and some precious objects, and farm animals decorated with garlands. They are wandering through the urban landscape, flowing from side streets into the main avenue. A beautiful, smiling crowd of mostly young people is apparently heading in the same, predetermined direction. Some people are impatiently watching the sky, and when the helicopters appear, they enthusiastically wave at them. Now you can see, in a slow, spectacular take, that these three machines are carrying large religious items: an altar, a chest, and a large seven-branched candelabrum. In the background, a moving song is heard the entire time, the atmosphere is becoming increasingly solemn, and finally one comes to understand where they are all headed: a gigantic temple towering over the city's other buildings. Its grandeur is highlighted by another scene in which a little boy is walking through a luxurious sacred space. People are dancing and singing, everyone is filled with joyful anticipation and excitement, the cheerful crowd is gathering inside. Now, the action shifts into the temple. The ambience of the film changes dramatically. The next sequence begins with a close-up of a man's face (we are about to find out that he is the chief priest), and then the focus shifts to the activities within the altar space. Surrounded by people dressed in white, the high priest is conducting a ceremony with dancing and flames in an enticing mixture of paganism and kitsch.

While he is reciting a prayer, the camera slowly moves over the devoted, even hypnotized faces of the faithful. Suddenly, a (hellish?) fire bursts out from the cherubim statues behind him and the shocked crowd jumps away from the altar. Now their faces express terror. Windows break, more fireballs appear, the earth splits open, and the faithful fall into the chasm with their baskets of gifts. Frenzied people scream, cry for help, and scramble for the door, climbing over each other in an attempt to escape, but they also take the menorah. The process of destruction is presented in slow motion and includes

the smallest detail. There are numerous victims, limp, bloody bodies litter the temple floor, as if a terrorist act has occurred. The head priest, however, is intact, he seems to be indifferent to the entire apocalypse around him. He slowly exits, and with him the last remaining worshipers carrying a golden palanquin. In the next shot, the temple is seen from a bird's eye view again. It collapses completely and disappears in a giant cloud of dust. After a while, a massive wall emerges with several single columns—that is all that is left of the majestic edifice. This is how the third sequence begins. The camera zooms in and we can see cards stuck to the wall and adoration resumed. The faithful pray at the wall, some of them wearing white prayer shawls. There are tourists everywhere, taking photos. These attractive young people look like a mix of Christian evangelists, Jewish pioneers and contemporary models. Among them are numerous traders selling “holy relics” and souvenirs, and even an actor dressed up like Jesus Christ, with a crown of thorns on his head, inviting people to take a “selfie”. The menorah, present in every sequence of the film, can now be spotted on T-shirts, china and coconuts, which the tourists drink from. This is the last scene of the film.

In *Inferno*, Yael Bartana takes the viewer on a journey between cultures and histories filled with symbols and meanings. The action takes place in São Paulo, in 21st-century Brazil, because the artist visited this location on the invitation of the curators Benjamin Seroussi and Eyal Danon.⁸ They executed the curatorial project Nova Jerusalém (which was later presented at the 31st São Paulo Biennale in 2014), the aim of which was to show a creative reflection on the phenomenon of the development of new religious movements in the Land of Coffee and their ties with Israel and Judaism. Its essence would seem to be a presentation of the inherent relationship between religion, culture and society (as well as the economy), which Bartana tries to explore in her film. The choice of the main “character” of the movie is symptomatic of these phenomena and is announced in the opening scene with the subtitles “São Paulo, Brazil, Anno Domini 2012. The inauguration of the Third Temple, the Temple of Solomon.” Here, the artist refers directly to the monumental Templo de Salomão, commissioned in 2014 (although it

⁸ Benjamin Seroussi was born in Paris, but currently lives in São Paulo, Brazil, and works there as a curator, editor and culture manager. In the years 2009–2012, he was the deputy director of Centro da Cultura Judaica (Centre for Jewish Culture, CCJ). Now he is one of the directors of Casa do Povo (a cultural centre—a living monument to Shoah) and a curator at Vila Itororó. Eyal Danon is the director and chief curator of the Israeli Centre for Digital Art in Holon and the co-editor of the online art, culture and media magazine *Maarav*.

was under construction since 2010).⁹ The temple was funded by billionaire Edir Macedo, leader of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, IURD). His wish was to create a replica of the Jerusalem Temple. It was a story that echoed around the world, but the author of *Inferno* seems to be interested in it for at least one fundamental reason which is undoubtedly the surprising interweaving of this story with her native Israel, or, in fact, with the ideas of Judaism and Zionism.

GOD'S KINGDOM ON EARTH

Contemporary Brazil is reflected in the act of the creation of the temple like in a mirror. According to Renata Siuda-Ambroziak, in contrast to the countries of Western Europe, where the processes of secularization have led to the disintegration of religious institutions, the churches and religious movements in Brazil not only adapted to the reality of the free-market economy, modernization, new technologies and globalization, but these processes are actually driving their development and evolution.¹⁰ A perfect example of this is the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which emerged under the specific conditions of a diverse, highly stratified Brazilian society. According to this Polish researcher, it appears to be unique in many respects: it is the most Catholic (in terms of the number of believers), and at the same time the most (Neo-)Pentecostal society in the world (“At the same time, it absorbed and domesticated the Pentecostal movement, giving it some specific Latin American and even more so, Brazilian features”), the society is distinguished by liberalism, eclecticism and syncretism in terms of religion, and also unprecedented activity and creativity in terms of expanding the scope of religious opportunities.¹¹ In this setting, a church emerged whose leader

⁹ It took four years to build and the cost was about 300 million US dollars. For more information on the temple, see Ahmad Alzoubi and Rita Freire, “The Myth of the Temple of Solomon II: Ostentation in Brazil,” *Middle East Monitor*, June 11, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230611-the-myth-of-the-temple-of-solomon-ii-ostentation-in-brazil>.

¹⁰ In her book, the author highlights the wide scope of the forms of religion and religiosity in Brazil, considering that this country is one of the most interesting “testing grounds” for researching these phenomena. She analyses religious practices, linking them to the entire culture and specificity of Brazilian society, from the beginning of Portuguese colonization to the present day (and the contemporary market for religion, as it is defined by them). See Renata Siuda-Ambroziak, *Religia w Brazylii. Uwarunkowania społeczno-kulturowe* (Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy „Nomos”, 2015), 9–10.

¹¹ Siuda-Ambroziak, 13–14.

wanted to perform a “miracle” for his faithful—the erection of the Third Temple of Solomon.

It all started in 1977, when Edir Macedo, who until then had been an accountant at a lottery company, a former member of the Catholic Church, and later a follower of spiritualist cults (such as the Afro-American Umbanda) and the first Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal Church (Nova Vida), registered his own church. A few decades later, IURD had branches all around the world and 13 million believers.¹² Also, its leader had built a genuine fortune and a media empire (with the large TV station Rede Record and the national daily paper *Folha Universal*, to name but a few). He had political influence and connections that reached as high as the presidents of the country. Several factors have contributed to this success. Macedo preached the theology of success, which was based on the assumption that health and prosperity in various spheres of life are a sign of God’s blessing in the here and now, as blessings are not only reserved for the afterlife. Such a programme ideally suited the poorest and uneducated, insecure strata of Brazilian society, the vast majority of whom were favela dwellers. It was this group who lost the most during the ongoing systemic transformations and shock economic experiments, which incurred the highest social costs of making the “Brazilian” miracle happen.¹³ Living in the vast urban slums, exposed to violence and without access to basic infrastructure and public services, occupying cramped temporary buildings, those people found in the Universal Church a religious counterweight to their daily problems. Macedo knew their life, mentality and needs very well, because he also came from a large poor family of migrants. It is for a reason that the temple is located in a traditionally working-class Brás district.

The first sequences of *Inferno* depict the megacity and its impoverished districts, as well as luxury skyscrapers, which are typical contrasts seen in Brazil. In Bartana’s film, smiling people visit the Templo de Salomão, carrying baskets full of victuals as their gifts, similar to an Old Testament tithe (only the produce of the soil that was God’s gift) to support the Levites (the tribe of priests). Words from the Book of Malachi may be recalled, “Bring

¹² The evidence of the scale of the IURD’s success may be, inter alia, events that took place in 1991, when Edir Mercado organized a meeting that competed with the visit of John Paul II, attracting 20,000 more of the faithful than the Pope did. The 20th anniversary of the establishment of the church was celebrated in 1997 with a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, during which the bishop of the church was decorated by the mayor of Jerusalem with a special order of merit; Siuda-Ambroziak, 152–61.

¹³ Siuda-Ambroziak, 147–56.

the full tithes and dues to the storehouse so that there may be food in my house, and then see if I do not open the flood gates of heaven for you and pour out blessings for you in abundance,”¹⁴ such a sentiment fully reflects the hope of the poor for a better life. In his activities, Macedo undoubtedly uses the “need for reciprocity in relations with the deity” this concept is deeply rooted in Brazilian culture and religiosity, which may be expressed by the Roman maxim *Do ut des* (I give you to give),¹⁵ linking the giver with the recipient. The more people give of themselves (that is, the greater the sacrifice they make to God through the pastors of the Church), the more blessings that will eventually return to them.

Belief in miracles (especially in miraculous healings) is another element of the Brazilian religious identity that emerged from Indian beliefs and shamanic cults imported from the Dark Continent by slaves brought to Brazil. The ideology of the Church of the Universal Kingdom of God is based on them, which, apart from proclaiming the gospel of prosperity, offers the provision of religious and therapeutic services (so-called spiritual rescue), the performance of ritual, group and individual exorcisms and the miracles of healings, as well as the use of objects that have special powers. Perhaps it is in anticipation of a miracle that the protagonists of Bartana’s film go to the temple so joyfully and with noticeable excitement, and then they are strongly focused on what is going on in the altar space. The artist plays with the camera angles to attract the viewer, the lens moves over beautiful young people praying in the temple with a white and gold shiny interior, while the sweet music of prayer in the background creates an increasingly mystic atmosphere. The faithful follow the ceremony led by the chief priest. It turns into an electrifying spectacle of dance, fire and words. This act represents a strategy that resembles the singing performances of faith with the pastors of the Universal Church playing the lead role. What is especially spectacular and dramatic, as Siudak-Ambroziak describes them, are public exorcisms. Their goal is to evoke an intense religious experience in their followers and enhance the belief that victory, resurrection, and rebirth are possible in the here and now. “In this way, the Church inspires the faithful to act, while emphasizing its importance as an intermediary which helps to change lives immediately, or practically overnight.”¹⁶

¹⁴ The Book of Malachi, 3:10; cited after catholic.org.

¹⁵ Siudak-Ambroziak, *Religia w Brazylii*, 138.

¹⁶ Siudak-Ambroziak, 185, 189.

Undoubtedly, the performance which goes ahead is not only for the faithful pictured by Bartana. As such, the film is a spectacle in its form—we can find in it stylistic borrowings from both epic painting art and the American Dream factory. The artist herself mentioned being inspired by *Ten Commandments*, directed by the legendary director Cecil B. DeMille.¹⁷ It is worth recalling that the first version of the 1923 film was considered to be a masterpiece of the silent cinema, and the second version (a remake of his own film) from 1956, featuring great Hollywood stars of the time, still inspires amazement with its truly epic scale. These were megaproductions that made a spectacle out of biblical themes and paved the path to Hollywood for them.¹⁸ Bartana did not have thousands of extras and a huge set, but compared to her other works, this film was also a megaproduction. It comes as no surprise since the hero is the mega-church in a Brazilian megalopolis. The production would not have worked out as a small-scale film or a documentary.

In *Inferno*, the artist used wide panoramic shots from a helicopter, slow motion, bright and saturated colours (reminiscent of the characteristic Technicolor colour scheme from DeMille's films), stylized costumes, and special effects. The temple had not yet been completed when she created her masterpiece, so she enhanced it using CGI. This is how the scenes from inside the Templo de Salomão were created (they were shot in a huge hangar used to house a samba school). CGI was also utilized to fill in the gaps in the outer layer of the unfinished edifice and to generate the massive objects suspended under the helicopters.¹⁹

The frames of *Inferno* also recall several earlier representations of events related to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. There is a scene from the relief decorating the triumphal arch of Emperor Titus (c. 81 AD), it was built by Domitian at the Forum Romanum, and shows soldiers bent under the weight of the treasures stolen from the Jerusalem temple (including the seven-branched menorah), it was actually transferred directly to Bartana's film. The only exception to this is that the faithful of the church played the role of soldiers. Other inspirations originate from paintings from the 17th and 19th centuries. Nicolas Poussin, a famous classicist painter, devoted two of his works to this subject: *The Destruction and Sack of the Temple of Jerusalem*

¹⁷ Sara Roffino, "In Conversation: Yael Barana with Sara Roffino," *The Brooklyn Rail* (February 2015), <https://brooklynrail.org/2015/02/art/yael-bartana-with-sara-roffino>.

¹⁸ Cecil B. DeMille was the creator of other similar, biblical and monumental film productions: *King of Kings* (1927), *Cleopatra* (1934), *Samson and Delilah* (1949).

¹⁹ Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua, "Artist Yael Bartana Taps into Jewish-Diaspora Zeitgeist," *Haaretz*, February 10, 2015, 8.

(1625–1626, now held by the Israel Museum, Jerusalem) and *The Conquest of Jerusalem by Emperor Titus* (1636, now at the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien). They depict a temple engulfed in flames, flashes of golden light from the temple vessels, an omnipresent sense of drama and wanton destruction. Similar impressions are evoked by the *Destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem* (1867, now at Gallerie dell'Accademia, Florence), a masterpiece by Francesco Hayez, one of the main promoters of Italian Romanticism. The artist worked on this painting for several years, but the painstaking work paid off, because it exudes an amazing visual power. Again, the viewer may see the building in flames once more, the destructive fury, the theft of the golden menorah, but there are also figures lying on the floor, depicted with great care with regard to their position and gestures—similar images of bodies appear in the final fragments of the sequence from inside the temple in the Israeli artist's film. The choreography of the movement of the fleeing faithful and the dramatic lighting of the fire reflected in the menorah also resemble the paintings of Caravaggio.

SACRED OBJECTS, RITES AND PRAYERS

Inferno refers to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem not only visually, but also at many other levels. Given that this event is of paramount importance to both Jewish and Christian history—as the final and irrevocable loss of the most sacred place on Earth for the Jews—the video has a much wider scope than just the cultural space of Brazil.

When analysing successive frames of the film, these references are clearly visible. Among them is an appealing scene in which three helicopters transport mysterious objects underneath, and these later turn out to be what every Jew considers to be sacred ritual objects from the Temple of Jerusalem. The first is the Golden Altar of Incense, the second is the greatest holy object for the Chosen People, the Ark of the Covenant, and the third one is the menorah. The Ark of the Covenant (אָרוֹן הַבְּרִית, *Aron ha-Berit*) is a chest containing the original tablets bearing the Ten Commandments. According to the instructions contained in the Bible, it was made from acacia wood, covered with gold inside and outside, and decorated with two golden cherubim (Heb. כְּרוּבִים, *keruvim*) facing each other, standing on the lid of the chest with outstretched wings. These winged spiritual beings were to appear wherever God's power was revealed. They were the source of the “hellfire” in

Bartana's vision, which brought about the destruction of the temple. As legend has it, the Ark was hidden by King Josiah (ca. 7th century BC) and will only be found in the messianic times. Its appearance in the Israeli artist's film is therefore an important moment in the narrative, explaining both the excitement and hope expressed by those going to the temple. These emotions are also intensified by the third holy object transported by a helicopter—the menorah (Heb. מְנוֹרָה 'lamp'). Its characteristic shape appeared in all of the above-mentioned representations of the temple's destruction. That golden seven-branch candelabrum²⁰ once stood in the First Tabernacle and later in the Temple of Jerusalem. For this reason, the image of the menorah is one of the oldest and most frequently used symbols in Jewish sacred art.²¹ Not surprisingly, it is also present in the final sequence of the film. However, at that point it no longer signifies the Divine Light watching over the Chosen People (so that they follow the Law given to them by the Lord), but rather, it simply becomes a motif (logotype) that has a chance to sell well in a given place and time.

The first part of the film, apart from the helicopters, also focuses on the procession of the faithful (pilgrims?). It accompanies them, dressed in white, and decorated with flowers and fruit.²² One may find in them the symbols of one of the three main Jewish pilgrim holidays. Shavuot (Heb. שבועות 'weeks'), which is also known as the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of the Harvest or the Day of the First Fruits, this was celebrated by going to the Temple in Jerusalem and offering the produce of the earth. Animals were also brought as sacrifices. This is what also happens in Bartana's film, according to the verses in Deuteronomy: "You will then celebrate the feast of Weeks for Yahweh your God with the gift of a voluntary offering proportionate to the degree in which Yahweh your God has blessed you."²³

²⁰ The Old Testament mentions six branches: "The first branch must carry three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with its calyx and petals; the second branch, too, must carry three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with its calyx and bud, and similarly for all six branches springing from the lampstand" (Exodus 25:33). The seventh branch was an extension of the vertical shaft from which the right and left cups extend to the right and left.

²¹ The menorah is, importantly, a symbol of Judaism. Its image is used in the national emblem of Israel.

²² In this sequence, Bartana recalled the famous actress and dancer Carmen Miranda, the first Brazilian artist to become an international star (1940s). It was then that her artistic image became established—a fiery Brazilian singer and dancer with a huge basket of fruit on her head. Many women in the Israeli artist's film wear such headgear.

²³ Book of Deuteronomy 16:9–10.

The artist shows the pilgrimage of the faithful in a fascinating way. This atmosphere is largely evoked by a song that goes back to the Talmudic era. It is “Avinu Malkeinu” (Heb. אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵנוּ ‘Our Father, Our King’). The title serves as an invocation before each subsequent verse. These following verses, in turn, become a kind of profession of faith (“We have no King but You”), a plea for forgiveness for the sins committed (“We have sinned before You”), and a request for blessing (“Renew for us a good year”). When the pilgrims enter Templo de Salomão, they are bidden farewell with the verse “Deal charitably and kindly with us and deliver us.” Then they are greeted by the sounds of the shofar (Heb. שׁוֹפָר), i.e. a trumpet made of a ram’s horn, used in biblical times to announce an important event, as well as for worship in the Jerusalem Temple. Here, the artist’s choice of songs is not random. Apart from being probably one of the most famous Jewish songs in the world,²⁴ “Avinu Malkeinu” touches our hearts and minds in a truly unique way. In the context of the film, Yael Bartana seems to include in it all of the desires and hopes of the Chosen People built up in relation to the Third Temple. This prayer is sung in *Inferno* at an important moment as the followers gather and travel together through the city, and ends when they arrive at the temple. As the artist explains: “It is a kind of dramaturgical choice. I wanted this moment in the movie to be extremely emotional; we are in the temple so it is very meaningful but also agitating... We tried different kinds of music, we even tried *Ave Maria*... I don’t know if *Avinu Malkeinu* was the right decision, but I think it works,... it is beyond kitschy dramatization, far beyond it.”²⁵ It is hard to disagree with the Israeli artist. Moreover, during an early scene in the temple, when the crowd is standing and watching the ceremony starting at the altar, a male voice recites a prayer in Hebrew. This prayer is Kaddish (Heb. קַדִּישׁ ‘holy’), which, as an element of most collective prayers, is considered one of the most important and most frequently recited prayers in Jewish liturgy. It expresses faith in one God and submission to His will. And, just as *Inferno* shows it, it is recited standing up facing Jerusalem (which was supposed to revive hope for the reconstruction of the Temple of Jerusalem), in the presence of a *minyan* (Heb. מִנְיָן ‘count, number’), that is, a congregation of ten male Jews. The artist presents an unorthodox version of Kaddish in which women are admitted.

²⁴ Undoubtedly, the worldwide fame of “Avinu Malkeinu” can largely be credited to Barbara Streisand and her daring performance of this prayer (the 1997 album *Higher Ground*). Interestingly, it was a slightly different arrangement than in the version most often assumed to be original.

²⁵ Roffino, “In Conversation.”

THREE TEMPLES AND THE NEW JERUSALEM

However, the most essential part of the Jewish tradition and religion and an aspect thereof that was reflected in Yael Bartana's suggestive projection, is, of course, the construction of the Third Temple. It became the starting point for the creation of a multi-threaded narrative, and new layers were added to it. Where does the significance of this story come from, and why are three temples mentioned?

Jerusalem Temple (Heb. *בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ*, *Beit ha-Miqdash*) was built by King Solomon on the Moriah Hill in Jerusalem (Heb. *מִוֶּרֶה* 'chosen by Yahweh') in the years 966–959 BC. Its most important part was the Holy of Holies (Heb. *קֹדֶשׁ הַקֹּדֶשִׁים*, *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*), a place sanctified by the presence of God, a place in which certain sacred objects were kept: the Ark of the Covenant, the menorah, the Altar of Incense. Before they were placed there, they served as a portable sanctuary—the Tent of Meeting (Heb. *מִשְׁכָּן*, *Mishkan* 'dwelling place'), which the Israelites carried with them during their exodus journey from Egyptian enslavement all the way to the Promised Land. In this way, Solomon's Temple became a place of God's presence, His residence on Earth, a space where it was possible for a man to meet the Lord. It was later called the First Temple (Heb. *בֵּית ראשון*, *Beit Rishon*) and it was destroyed four centuries later by the Babylonians in 586 BC. About seventy years later, Zerubbabel undertook its reconstruction after the return of the Chosen People from Babylonian captivity. The finished temple stood in the same place and was designed based on the temple of Solomon. It was then called the Second Temple (Heb. *בֵּית הַשֵּׁנִי*, *Beit ha-Sheni*), becoming the most important (and since that time the only) sacred place of the Israelites—a place to worship the God of Yahweh and offer sacrifices to Him.²⁶ At the turn of the eras, Herod the Great, undertook another renovation, which was, in fact, a substantial reconstruction.²⁷ However, sacrifices to God were not stopped even for one day while this work was taking place, and therefore this new building was never called the Third Temple. Herod's Temple, which is attributed to the Second Temple period, soon burnt down during the fighting between the Romans led by Titus (the later emperor) and Jewish

²⁶ Janusz Lemański, "Kilka uwag na temat różnych koncepcji świątyni w Starym i Nowym Testamencie," *Rocznik Skrzatuski* 8 (2020): 22–23.

²⁷ Regarding the project of the Temple of Herod, its implementation in the context of the reconstruction of Jerusalem and its Romanization is discussed in Magdalena Maciudzińska-Kamczycka, "Herod Wielki i 'nowa' Jerozolima," *Studia Europaea Gnesnensia* 8 (2013): 179–206.

insurgents (70 AD), and from then on, almost every prophet of Israel has predicted that the temple will be rebuilt. Its only vestige is a part of the retaining wall supporting the temple platform, which was built in the times of Herod. It is widely known as the Western Wall (Heb. הכּוֹתֵל הַמַּעֲרָבִי, *ha-Kotel ha-Maaravi*), but is even more often referred to as the Wailing Wall, it became a holy place of Judaism from the 16th century onwards. It is at the foundation of this wall that devout Jews have prayed for several centuries.²⁸

In her film, Yael Bartana visualizes the destruction of the temple, with the huge wall as its only remnant. We watch people praying at the wall, just like in Jerusalem. They also cultivate the habit of writing requests on scraps of paper, which they tuck into the cracks in the wall (so that they will always lie at the feet of God). In Bartana's vision, Jerusalem from biblical times and its contemporary version are still intertwined with the 21st-century edifice in São Paulo. It would seem that a similar artistic strategy is pursued by Efrat Shvily in her project. In *The Jerusalem Experience* (2014), which was also created as a part of the curatorial initiative *Nova Jerusalém*, the Israeli artist takes the viewers on a journey through the oldest parts of Jerusalem, and then "discovers" it in the largest South American megacity—São Paulo. Shvily recorded the various phases of the construction of the monumental Solomon's Temple being built by the Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God according to biblical patterns and proportions, in order to juxtapose them with similar "initiatives" in old Jerusalem. She is primarily interested in activities aimed at creating a kind of "sensual reproduction of reality" or, in other words, the transformation of a historic city into an "experience". In this way, she shows various "degrees of illusion". The viewers who look at her photographs and films at the exhibition face the challenge of distinguishing between the old and the new, real and false, literal and metaphorical. But whatever they depict—newly manufactured cult objects, scenes of historical reconstructions, selfies taken in front of the Wailing Wall, fragments of archaeological excavations or the tabernacle—the photos provide a disturbing sense of homogeneity, even though they were not taken in one specific place. And despite the fact that they were collected from the Old City and the City of David in Jerusalem and from the Brás district in São Paulo, they still seem to originate from a single source. In this "experi-

²⁸ Stanisław Szczuro, "Ściana Płaczu," *Izrael24.pl*, July 18, 2021, <https://izrael24.pl/sciana-placzu-18-07-2021>.

ence” of Jerusalem, Efrat Shvili discovers not only the formula of the spectacle, but largely intertwines political, religious and commercial interests.²⁹

Bartana also constructs her film with reference to contemporary debates and the social and religious reality of two seemingly distant countries. But the distance is not so great at all—at least on religious grounds. This was, moreover, the starting point of the aforementioned *Nova Jerusalém* project. Its curators, Benjamin Seroussi and Eyal Danon, have claimed in a summary of the 31st São Paulo Biennale that Evangelical churches have gained enormous position and influence in Brazilian society. In 35 years (until 2014), the number of Brazilians declaring themselves to be the followers of Evangelical churches increased from 6.6 to 22 percent of the population. Surprisingly, these relatively new religious movements (established a few decades ago at the earliest) feature significant references to the Bible and Israel. Many of them claim to be the “New Hebrews”. They borrow Hebrew words, Jewish symbols and rituals in their churches. Additionally, names and symbols traditionally associated with Judaism flourish in the Brazilian slums and city centres. Churches, shops and restaurants have Jewish phrases in their names, such as “El Shaddai” (Heb. אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי ‘Almighty God’), “Shalom” (Heb. שָׁלוֹם, ‘Peace be with you’) or “Betel” (Heb. בֵּית אֵל ‘House of God’, the biblical city, most often mentioned in the Old Testament right after Jerusalem). These are just some examples, but they show that São Paulo—which once declared its modernity (also meaning “secularity”), is changing so that it seems as if God has returned to the city. The phenomenon, as argued by Seroussi and Danon, is spreading virtually throughout the whole country, linking the history and the identity of Brazilian society with the fate of the Chosen People in a surprising way.³⁰

²⁹ Jörg Bader, “Efrat Shvili. The Jerusalem Experience,” Camera Austria, 2015, exhibition brochure, <https://camera-austria.at/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ca-ausstellung-shvili-folder.pdf>.

³⁰ Benjamin Seroussi and Eyal Danon, “Nova Jerusalém,” in *How to Talk about Things That Don’t Exist: Bienal and Itaú present 31st Bienal*, ed. Nuria Enguita, Erick Beltrán, and Charles Esche (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2014), 296–97. It is also worth noting that one of the authors of the project, Benjamin Seroussi (see note 8 above), is involved in São Paulo’s cultural institutions, the aim of which is precisely to achieve an Israeli-Brazilian rapprochement. One of them is the CCJ, which is a private cultural institution, founded in 1964 and focused on disseminating Jewish culture and the cultural creativity of Israel, and strengthening the ties between the Jewish community and Brazilian society. It was where Seroussi worked when he invited Bartana to São Paulo. Later he transferred to Casa do Povo, another extraordinary place linking Jewish history with Brazil. As Seroussi explained, the facility was established as a place where remembering means performing acts that stimulate the imagination to design other possible future scenarios. “We strongly believe that the future can only be built when looking the

An even more surprising formula of this “rapprochement” is presented by another Israeli artist participating in the project about the “New Jerusalem”, Nurit Sharett, who together with researchers Arie Wagner, Carlos Gutierrez and Anita Novinsky, went on a tour of Brazil. The result was the film *Counting the Stars* (2014), which tells a story about the Anusim groups. The 16th-century term “Anusim” (Heb. אָנוּסִים ‘coerced ones’) referred to Jews who were forced to renounce their religion and convert to Christianity or Islam. Those contacted by Bartana in Brazil are believed to descend from refugees from the Iberian Peninsula, forced to convert 500 years ago by the Inquisition. The film consists of Sharett’s conversations with these people, as well as with historians, anthropologists, a psychoanalyst, and rabbis. It sheds light on the contemporary phenomenon of the rediscovery and return to Judaism by the descendants of the Anusim. Most of them face rejection by the communities in which they live: the Brazilian Jews, the State of Israel, the rabbinical establishment, and sometimes even their own families. Nevertheless, they resolve to remain true to their lifestyle choices. Interestingly, they discover their Jewish roots most often through Evangelical churches. *Counting the Stars*, therefore, refers to the lost “tribe” of the new Jews, in order to depict the complex tangle of relationships between Judaism, evangelization and the history of colonial Brazil. At the same time, Sharett thus reflects on the changes and transformations of religious identity, as well as the struggle for the legitimization of one’s own identity.³¹

Broadly speaking, the same can be said about Bartana’s *Inferno*. This flexibility in terms of creating a religious identity may serve as the basis for the creation of new narratives and building a possible future based on a mythical past, and this is what the artist is trying to show in her film. After all, it is important to remember the significance of the idea of the Third Temple.

One may, of course, wonder what purpose is really served by the discourse about the ancient concept. What connection could the recreation of a

past—in all its versions—in the eyes. This is especially true in Brazil where there are very few initiatives that critically deal with the history of the country. *Casa do Povo* can be seen as a monument dedicated to minor narratives. It was built by people who insisted on defending other versions of our past. In that sense it is a kind of anti-monument that constantly brings history down to the ground.” See International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. “Member Profile: Remembering Means Acting at Casa do Povo,” accessed September 4, 2024, <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/2016/01/casa-do-povo>. These words seem to contain echoes of Maurice Halbwachs’ reflections.

³¹ Seroussi and Danon, “Nova Jerusalém,” 296–97; see <https://www.nuritsharett.com/video>.

biblical temple have with today's world? The Chosen People lived without it for almost 2,000 years, so why even think about rebuilding? The answer to this question is complex. Since the destruction of the Second Temple religious Jews have prayed to God to allow the erection of another temple: "Restore the House of our life and affairs and make Shekhinah [God's incorporeal presence] dwell among us." Additionally, in the book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible, its author linked the temple to the coming of the Messianic Kingdom and that it would become part of a new era of peace and Heaven on Earth. Belief in the rebuilding of the Temple is therefore important to Orthodox Judaism,³² although there is a disagreement as to whether this should happen in the era of the Jewish Messiah by God's providence, or whether the Jews themselves should try to rebuild it as soon as possible. Moreover, the Chief Rabbi has banned people from entering the area to prevent the forbidden places from being desecrated. Devout Jews, therefore, do not enter this area, perhaps fearing that they might accidentally stand in the place where the Holy of Holies once used to be, instead they pray at its base, the so-called Wailing Wall.

Undoubtedly, since the establishment of the State of Israel (1948) and then since the events of the Six-Day War (1967), which resulted in the Temple Mount (Heb. הַר הַבַּיִת, *Har ha-Bayit*; Arab. *Al-Haram ash-Sharif*) coming under the control of Israel, there has been a great deal of interest among the Israeli public in the status of the site where the ancient temples once stood. These facts brought the prospect of building a Third Temple closer to reality than ever. Some orthodox, right-wing Jewish organizations are trying to do so at present. Founded in 1967, the Temple Mount and Eretz Yisrael Faithful Movement was the first to demand the Jewish takeover of the Mount, and now is focused on rebuilding the Temple. In turn, the Temple Institute, which has been operating since 1987 (Heb. מְכוּן הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, *Machon ha-Mikdash*), has developed educational and popularization activities for this idea, and furthermore, it makes actual preparations, developing genuine ritual objects for the temple; at this point, garments and construction plans are ready for immediate use. In the current Israeli political landscape, Israeli MPs are calling for it more and more boldly.³³ Their various property claims are based on the

³² The idea of a Third Temple also appeared in secular Zionist utopias, such as Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* (*Old-New Land*, 1902) and Boris Schatz's *Yerushalayim Habnuya*, *Halom Behakitz* (*Built Jerusalem, a daytime dream*, 1924).

³³ A 2013 poll found that around a third of Israeli Jews support the construction of the Third Temple, but in the past few years, increasingly nationalistic and extreme trends in Israeli politics have moved the topic from the margins of Israeli political discourse to the mainstream. See Cj

same chronological priority rule “We were here first.”³⁴ After all, these ideas represent a kind of utopia, because the situation of this place is extremely complicated and perhaps impossible to solve.

There are two extremely important Muslim sacred places on the Temple Mount, the Al-Aqsa Mosque (*Al-Masğid al-Aqsà*) and the Dome of the Rock (*Kubbat as-Sachra*), which occupies the site where Herod’s Temple once stood. Any effort to destroy or restrict access to these sites, or to build Jewish structures within, between or on them, or even in their place will very likely spark major international conflicts. Christians also have a claim to the Mount. All of these issues have made this place one of the most vulnerable flashpoints in the Middle East over a long period of time. This conflict is deeply rooted in the violent history of Jerusalem (with the Temple Mount), which has been attacked 52 times, conquered and recaptured 44 times, besieged 23 times and destroyed twice. The city was ruled by the ancient Egyptians, Canaanites, Israelites, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Byzantines, the Islamic Caliphate, Crusaders, Ottomans, and finally by the British, before the city was split into Israeli and Jordanian sectors (1948–1967), and later “regained” by Israel (from 1967).³⁵

THE “REPLICA” OF THE TEMPLE

With her film, Yael Bartana focuses on the Third Temple, and jumps right into the middle of a historical period spanning more than two millennia, which is both inflammatory and divisive even in our present time. Due to the fact that the Temple is not in Jerusalem but in São Paulo, there are additional connections in the context of its location and the personality of its founder. What is intriguing about this vision is that it was only brought to life by an enterprising bishop of a neo-Pentecostal church in Brazil, far from Israel.

Werleman, “Arab Normalization Emboldens ‘Third Temple’ Israeli Fanatics,” *Inside Arabia Voice of the Arab People*, August 28, 2020 accessed December 20, 2021, <https://insidearabia.com/arab-normalization-emboldens-third-temple-israeli-fanatics>.

³⁴ Temple Institute, “Statement of Principles,” accessed September 3, 2024, <https://templeinstitute.org/statement-of-principles-2>.

³⁵ Mohamed Galal Mostafa, “Religion and the Israel-Palestinian Conflict: Cause, Consequence, and Cure,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, “Fikra Forum,” May 31, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/religion-and-israel-palestinian-conflict-cause-consequence-and-cure>. Ron E. Hassner argues that any sacred site is by definition a source of violence between different religious groups and is... inherently indivisible; Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 21, 38.

This is the main reason why Bartana decided to investigate this phenomenon and joined the artist-in-residence programme in São Paulo.

Edir Macedo continuously refers to the above-mentioned traditions using the mechanisms of collective identity creation. He explains that he was inspired by a pilgrimage to Jerusalem; he said he wished that “people could tread on the ground and touch the stones that were witnesses to the events described in the Bible.”³⁶ His views are shared by the Temple’s designer, the architect Rogério Silva de Araújo, who assures us that the worshippers who visit it will have the impression that they are in the authentic Temple of Solomon, starting from its facade, then going through the atrium, into the nave. The prevailing desire was to bring the visitors back into the past. After all, for this reason, 8-million-dollar stones for the pillars, entrance, and the central aisle were brought from Jerusalem, like those used in the First Temple (“stones that witnessed the power of God 2,000 years ago”). This is the official version, but as Tessa Morrison, an Australian researcher in the history of architecture contends the resulting structure is neither built according to the biblical proportions of Solomon’s Temple, nor has it any of the features specified in the Bible. It more closely resembles the Herodian Temple which was built over 550 years later. She explains that there are many theories about the features of Solomon’s Temple, from art and architecture to politics and religion; however, its latest replica only has a very loose connection with the original.³⁷ On the one hand, the replica thus lacks the architectural features of the First Temple (both outside and inside), and on the other hand, the “officials” of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God claim Solomon’s inheritance (and his associated qualities, such as wisdom, justice, and piety). They attempt to create their own “hieroglyphic representation” of the temple, which was then repeated like a mantra by the mass media around the world. A common element is undoubtedly the Ark of the Covenant, but in *Templo de Salomão* in Sao Paulo—as Yael Bartana predicted and showed in her film—it is “used” in the wrong context that is rather inconsistent with the Judaic tradition. For Bishop Macedo, it is used in a rather symbolic way,

³⁶ Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, “O desejo no coração do Bispo Edir Macedo,” *Templo de Salomão*, accessed September 4, 2024, <https://www.otemplodesalomao.com/a-inspiracao>. All English translations are mine.

³⁷ Tessa Morrison, “The Built Narrative as Architectural History,” *The International Journal of Literary Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2013): 1–18. In her text, the author carries out a comparative analysis of the plan of the *Templo de Salomão* in Sao Paulo with biblical descriptions, and then refers to the reconstructions made by Juan Bautista Villalpando (16th century) and John Wood (17th century).

it is well-lit and displayed in an open place so that as many people as possible can see it. It is not without a reason that the Temple's structure is so monumental that it is four times taller than the biblical prototype. Moreover, it became the most dominant religious object in Brazil, twice as large as the country's most famous symbol of Catholicism, the Statue of Christ the Saviour in Rio de Janeiro. The author of *Inferno* seems to have taken note of the tactic of the IURD, which uses symbolism and biblical rituals,³⁸ in order to give its own building (and the Church as a whole, which was established in 1977) an aura of antiquity and historical continuity. In this context, the IURD's temple is supposed to be perceived as a structure invented and designed by God. So, it is a kind of transferred sacred place—one that will be worshiped in its own right by appropriating the history of other people and places.

RITUALS AND INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Yael Bartana enters this world with her Israeli baggage and a unique, individual biography. In order to understand her work, we should bear in mind that she developed living in a “country of constant conflict and tension, permanent fear, but also a Zionist tradition”—and this stays put whether she works in Israel or elsewhere.³⁹ Bartana recalls that she joined the army unquestioningly (military service is compulsory for all Israeli citizens): “I came from a family in which participation in military rituals essentially defined us. There was only one way of living: you are to serve the people, the enemy

³⁸ These references are not only about the name of the temple, its “replica” status, rituals and the religious objects inside. As IURD representatives explain, the whole temple complex includes a replica of the biblical Garden of the Temple of Solomon (with a replica of the tabernacle of Moses and its vessels). Visitors can also enter the Jerusalem Memorial, which recalls the history of the Temple of Jerusalem and the twelve tribes of Israel, and then admire the century-old olive trees. See <https://www.otemplodesalomao.com>. Interestingly, one of the latest plans is to create a Holocaust museum within the Temple.

³⁹ Karol Sienkiewicz, “Yael Bartana,” *Culture.pl*, April 15, 2011, <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/yael-bartana>. The artist describes the country as follows: “Israel exists in a constant state of social and civic danger. The endangerment policy pursued by the government does not solve the existing social problems, on the contrary it pushes social issues to the margin. The politics of endangerment, along with national anniversaries and memorial days, is an integral part of the construction of the Israeli sense of community, and unity.” See Magdalena Ziółkowska, “Z Yael Bartaną o jej filmach, wspólnocie, granicy i Izraelu—rozmawia Magdalena Ziółkowska,” *Obieg*, April 27, 2006, <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/rozmowy/5722>.

is everywhere. Only later did I become critical.”⁴⁰ Another important element of her identity was formed due to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1995), who, as Chief of the General Staff, won the Six-Day War and, after almost 20 years, oversaw a peaceful solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. He was murdered by a young law student in the name of a religious-nationalist doctrine that sanctifies the historic land of Israel while harming the peace process and reconciliation treaties. It was a traumatic and shocking event for a large part of Israeli society. With this death, for many people the hope of a lasting peace died too. Bartana left Israel in the latter half of the 1990s and began to examine how her nation functions from a new perspective and how war, the military and religious rituals, and a constant sense of danger shape everyday life, how Israeli society influences the imagination of individual people. Galit Eilat, the curator of several of her exhibitions, explains: “It is part of the collective narrative in Israel, and it is difficult to scrutinize it critically while living in the country. I think that when Yael left Israel, she attained a certain distance from it, gained an opportunity to look at herself and the society she was a part of. You cannot see yourself against the background of the society in which you grew up, so when you leave it, in a sense you see yourself in a mirror.”⁴¹

As a result, in her films, installations and photographs, Yael Bartana explores certain ideas about identity and memory politics. These are the themes that run through her entire oeuvre, but in her early works she refers primarily to discovering the mechanisms for confirming the collective identity of the Israeli nation-state. What seems important is that the artist usually does not document the ritual itself, but only the side effects. Before *Inferno* (2013), she made *Profiles* (2000), in which Israeli female soldiers, while training at a shooting range, hold their guns for the first time and try to shoot, and behind the scenes you can hear the officer’s voice who drills them and strips them of their individuality. In the unusual scenery of *Trembling Time* (2001), which is illuminated by car lights, drivers pay tribute to the fallen soldiers—the sound of car horns completely halts the traffic, but not the state and military rituals associated with Memorial Day for Israel’s Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Hostile Acts.⁴² *Ad de’lo Yoda’* (2003) presents

⁴⁰ Mateusz Demski, “Zdążyć przed północą. Rozmowa z Yael Bartaną,” *Przekrój*, October 21, 2021, <https://przekroj.pl/kultura/zdazyc-przed-polnoca-rozmowa-z-yael-bartana-mateusz-demski>.

⁴¹ Charles Esche and Galit Eilat, “Rozmowa Charlesa Esche i Galit Eilat z Yael Bartaną,” 2011, <https://labiennale.art.pl/wystawy/yael-bartana-i-zadziwi-sie-europa>.

⁴² Yael Bartana in conversation with Florian Malzacher refers to the ritual of Memorial Day for Israel’s Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Hostile Acts as a very early experience in her life: “a very

images from a traditional Jewish celebration observed through an open door (as if from the perspective of an outsider). The *Declaration* (2006) is a way to confront symbols, the Israeli flag and the Palestinian olive tree, with a reference to the Zionist propaganda of the 1930s and 1940s. *Summer Camp/Awodah* (2007) presents a group of volunteers rebuilding a Palestinian home in the Occupied Territories that had been destroyed by Israelis, re-confronting the Zionist ethos of building and rebirth. This topic is continued by *The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection* (2008), in which young Arabs and Jews stage original photos of Leni and Herbert Sonnenfeld, thus illustrating the heroic, utopian vision of beautiful, joyful, hopeful farmers, workers and soldiers—future settlers in Eretz Yisrael, or the Land of Israel. This challenge to the ethos of the Zionist movement is confronted by the artist with contemporary activities in *The Recorder Player from Sheikh Jarrah* (2010) showing a young woman who plays melodies which are associated with mourning services in front of a cordon of Israeli policemen during a rally against the eviction of Muslim residents. One of Bartana's most famous works *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, or the so-called "Polish trilogy", consisted of three films: *Nightmare* (2007), *Wall and Tower* (2009), and *Assassination* (2011). The artist explores the complex system of social and political relationships between Jews, Poles and other Europeans in the era of globalization. She juxtaposes Zionist dreams, the traditions of the Israeli settlement movement, anti-Semitism, the experience of the Holocaust, and the Palestinian right to their own land.

This heavy "burden" of Zionism is also present in *Inferno*. Zionism, according to Charles Esche, the curator and director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, "was an emancipation movement which, over the course of its long history, turned into something else. It started with great hopes: kibbutzim, socialism, a new country, new architecture, a new society—an experiment for which I still have great respect... It was a dream-nightmare that turned into a nightmare only."⁴³ In *Inferno*, Bartana seems to be showing a similar kind of utopia, and she achieves this in the form of an experiment

physical and emotional experience, and also a bit embarrassing for a child. It becomes a sensual memory of the body. As a child, you don't understand why you need to stay silent, but you certainly experience it very deeply. And it is a clearly performative moment—and as such it must be public ... visible." See Florian Malzacher, "We Need to Create Alternative Moments of Commemoration. Yael Bartana in conversation with Florian Malzacher," in *Two Minutes of Standstill: A Collective Performance by Yael Bartana*, ed. Florian Malzacher and Stefanie Wenner (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 20.

⁴³ Esche and Eilat, "Rozmowa."

that she has already tested while creating the “Polish trilogy”. It is in these movies that she looks at Israeli-Jewish relations in the context of another country on a larger scale for the first time. She said: “I wanted to create a new laboratory. A new place for research and experimentation. My first thought was that Poland and Israel have a lot in common. We Israelis must constantly confront our present and past; it is similar in Poland... It was something that I never felt in the Netherlands or Sweden.”⁴⁴ In the film about the Brazilian “New Jerusalem”, the *Templo de Salomão* and the rituals invoked in its space are the most important elements of this experiment. Bartana refers here to the strategy which had already been noted in ancient times: the ritual of apotheosis, which in the context of Roman emperors is described by Paul Zanker, a German researcher of classical archaeology. He wrote: “Great religious rituals organized by the state are of crucial importance to the life of society. The celebration and ritual express the prevailing social order and ethical norms present in society and its worldview. Both active and passive participation in ritual allows society to experience itself as a community. One of the elements of such ceremonies is a space reserved for special purposes, the city stage and the monuments in front of which and within which these ceremonies take place. During the ceremony, these spaces acquire a specific meaning in the eyes of the participants and viewers, and it is these same spaces and monuments that later retain the memory of the experiences of Holy days and rituals.”⁴⁵

FACT AND FICTION, PROPHECY AND HISTORY,
UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA

When creating her film as a part of the *Nova Jerusalém* project, the Israeli artist followed similar assumptions—this time she used contemporary Brazil and São Paulo with *Templo de Salomão*, the construction of which she witnessed, as a framework for narrating the creation and the use of collective memory. While working on *Inferno*, Bartana used her experiences from different countries and cultures. She grew up in Israel, now she shares her time between Berlin, Amsterdam and Tel Aviv, and often works on different continents, she becomes passionately involved in the local context of the place

⁴⁴ Esche and Eilat, “Rozmowa.”

⁴⁵ Paul Zanker, *Apoteoza cesarzy rzymskich. Rytuał i przestrzeń miejska*, trans. Lechosław Olaszewski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Contact, 2005), 7.

where her works were created—as in the case of Poland, which meant that she represented Poland at the 54th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia (2011).⁴⁶ She says, “As an immigrant, you are always an outsider; you look at the society around you in a different way.”⁴⁷ Despite all the years spent among the diaspora, she still refers to her homeland in her art. In order to present her view as an amateur anthropologist on the complex tangle of relations between Israel and Brazil in the best possible way, she used a specific method of work on the occasion of the movie about the Third Temple. She describes it as a historical pre-enactment, which may be defined as “combining facts with fiction and prophecies with history”. She used it for the first time in *And Europe Will Be Stunned*. It was at that point in her artistic practice that an important shift took place: from documenting reality to staging rituals and fictional events.

Therefore, in *Inferno*, Bartana presents religious rituals (the Feast of Shavout, the song “Avinu Malkeinu”, Kaddish, the prayer at the Wailing Wall), she summons places and objects of memory (Jerusalem Temple, Wailing Wall, Ark of the Covenant, menorah), adds her own elements to this prophecy (the rise of the Third Temple and the coming of the messianic era), and then undertakes a reconstruction commemorating historical events (the destruction of the First and Second Temple). She takes all of these elements to a completely new place and time, with its own context and current problems, but she never forgets what is happening in her home country. She combines and mixes it all together—places, times, rituals—trying, as she says, “to understand all this madness around messianism from the point of view of the evangelists and also from the point of view of the Jews”;⁴⁸ she also explores how myth creates reality and to what extent reality may be fluid. One may assume that Bartana is convinced that the best way to predict the future in this context is to invent it. She imagines and presents alternative socio-religious realities, embedding a vision of the future in the past and

⁴⁶ “54. Międzynarodowa Wystawa Sztuki — la Biennale di Venezia: Yael Bartana ... i zadziwi się Europa,” Zachęta, n.d., accessed September 4, 2024, <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/wystawy/yael-bartana-i-zadziwi-sie-europa>. Sebastian Cichocki, the curator of the Polonia Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, explained that in this case we cannot speak of Bartana as a representative of Poland, but rather as a representative of Polish culture; see Adam Mazur, “Nie chciałem być w skórze Yael Bartany,” *Dwutygodnik.com*, no. 65 (September, 2011), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/2578-nie-chcialbym-byc-w-skorze-yael-bartany.html>.

⁴⁷ Esche and Eilat, “Rozmowa.”

⁴⁸ Emily Rappaport, “Yael Bartana on Israel, the Myths Underlying Nation States, and Being a Political Artist,” *artsy.net*, September 9, 2015, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-yael-bartana-on-israel-the-myths-underlying-nation-states-and-being-a-political-artist>.

the constantly revived idea of building a version of Heaven on Earth. For this purpose, the artist celebrates fiction, distresses and confuses viewers as to what is fact and what is fiction, what is past and what is present, what is myth and what is reality, mixing religious and national rituals together. In this vein, she refers to the French philosopher, the author of *Aesthetics as a Politics*: “Jacques Rancière spoke of ‘fictionalization’. You change something small in reality to create a fiction which allows you to take a fresh look at that reality. This is a move that interested me; it’s as if someone threw a boomerang and someone else grabbed it and returned it. I am interested in the tension between reality and fiction, when fiction becomes reality and reality becomes fiction. This is what fascinates me.”⁴⁹

It may therefore be concluded that the author of *Inferno* creates a social experiment with the help of the film, stages the reality within it, observes what is happening and finally “documents” it. Most importantly, her visually beautiful and spectacular work, which includes ancient Jewish rituals and history, does not just refer to 21st-century Brazil, a country where Pentecostal movements, born of evangelical Protestantism, are the fastest growing form of religion, and hence changing the society and cultural landscape of this still overwhelmingly Catholic country. They are equally, if not more so, related to Israel, which has undergone a demographic and conceptual shift in recent years from its founding Zionist agendas to a growing sense of nationalist and religious piety and the militarization of life. It may be supposed that the way to reveal the constitutive narratives of a given society is, according to her, to place them in a foreign historical and geographical context, to reveal their lack of authenticity, which is expressed in the final meaningful scenes of Bartana’s *Inferno*. They begin with the destruction of Solomon’s Temple: there is a fire and the Earth splits, which in a way becomes the materialization of the Christian representation of hell. Then the image of the new Wailing Wall, the only vestige of the original temple, appears. The faithful pray, dressed in their tallit prayer shawls, or they put in their requests into the cracks of the wall. Among them is a young man who drops his tallit, revealing his naked back with two tattooed eagle wings—a symbol of the Israeli Air Force. At the same time, in the square, traders sell souvenirs with Jewish symbols, and the new Jesus is wandering among the faithful and the multi-coloured, singing crowd of tourists who look like

⁴⁹ Sigal Barkai, “Neurotic Fantasy: The Third Temple as a Metaphor in the Contemporary Israeli Art of Nira Pereg and Yael Bartana,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 6 (2019): 249–50.

models featured by old United Colours of Benetton adverts. History has come full circle.

In this final scene, Bartana seems to be showing some of the consequences of the rise of the Third Temple. “When I heard about the Brazilian temple, I spontaneously said that it has to be destroyed. It was obvious that this attempt to create a utopian reality may bring about its own destruction. It is enough to look at history to see where utopian movements are leading.”⁵⁰ Perhaps, as Ella Elbaz argues, it is not all about the future that is yet to materialize, but rather about a tangible sense of what the present carries as a terrible possibility.⁵¹ Holy places always attract insane people. The work contains a potential diagnosis of Israeli society, whose identity is constantly determined by the tension between history and memory, between imagination and reality, between the heavenly and the earthly Jerusalem.⁵² In her research into religion and mysticism, Bartana shows various versions and narratives, including the interpretation according to which a replica of the Temple has been built, for which God has not given any order, among a nation that is not the Chosen People and does not inhabit the land promised by God, and therefore it is a forgery (and deserves a punishment). The last scenes of *Inferno* at the Wailing Wall illustrate how religious rituals that were previously turned into a spectacle also become something to buy and sell. In this process of the mercantilization of the sacred, the example of the Church of the Universal Kingdom of God is significant. Using the elements of collective memory—such as (unverifiable) history, artefacts, events and ritual aesthetics—the IURD functions as an exemplary religious enterprise, designed to provide clients with an attractive, tailor-made, sought-after religious product and charge for it.⁵³

Yael Bartana, however, wants her work to speak as openly as possible. “We tend to disregard other narratives to justify our own actions and our own beliefs. But we also need to look at other narratives. If there is one mes-

⁵⁰ Igal Avidan, “An ‘Inferno’ Erupts at the Berlin Film Festival,” *Times of Israel*, February 18, 2014, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/an-inferno-erupts-at-the-berlin-film-festival>.

⁵¹ Ella Elbaz, “The Future of Temple Mount: Imagined Possibilities in Contemporary Palestinian and Israeli Art,” *Dibur Literary Journal* 6 (2018): 12.

⁵² According to a 2018 report by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 45% of Israeli Jews describe their lifestyle as secular, 25% as traditional, 16% as very religious, and 14% as ultra-Orthodox. However, due to different political arrangements, secular Israelis are forced by the religious minority to follow many religious practices in the name of the “religious status quo”. See Barkai, “Neurotic Fantasy,” 250.

⁵³ Siudak-Ambroziak, *Religia w Brazylji*, 175–81.

sage behind all of my anti-propaganda, it is not to assume that anything is a fact.”⁵⁴ The artist, therefore, wants her viewers to ask questions and reflect upon their own identity and history, which is largely based on narratives constructed by the rituals of society. In other words, in *Inferno*, she indicates the flexibility of faith and religion, using both imaginary and documented (real) elements as a method of undermining the main narratives which are assumed to be true. She explains that this system of work allows her to depict an alternative reality as well as illustrating gaps in the religious and cultural narrative and the unrepresented reality. This often confuses the audience and, as a consequence, requires a reappraisal of her own position.⁵⁵ Bartana believes that the role of her art is to ask questions and undermine the status quo, and that this is the responsibility of the artist. Undoubtedly, her film about the “New Jerusalem” is a perfect example of this.

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⁵⁴ Fox-Bevilacqua, “Artist Yael Bartana,” 8.

⁵⁵ Yael Bartana, “Interview with Artist Yael Bartana,” *Aesthetica*, August 14, 2014, <https://aestheticamagazine.com/interview-artist-yael-bartana>.

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