

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
1–14

© The Author(s) 2019

Reprints and permissions:
[in.sagepub.com/journals-
permissions-india](http://in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india)

DOI: 10.1177/2347798919872586
journals.sagepub.com/home/mes



Sigal Barkai¹

Abstract

In the political reality of Israel, some symbols lie at the heart of the political, religious, national, and historical discourse that characterize the peoples and cultures living on the Israeli-Palestinian soil. Among these, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is one of the most complex and conflictual symbols. The multiple religious claims to the Temple Mount—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—are the subject of extensive study, but this article focuses on their reflection in contemporary Israeli art. In traditional Jewish art, the visual representations of the Temple or of Jews praying nearby expressed the longing of the Jews for generations to return to the Mount. In contrast, Yael Bartana and Nira Pereg view the multiple socio-political currents and religious rituals surrounding the Temple Mount as a reflection of the internal public debate regarding the face of the Israeli society today. This article discusses the contribution of their visual art to a conscious and aware discourse about the Israeli society and the underground currents that shape its contemporary identity. The analysis of their work tracks a “politics of aesthetics”—interpretation of the images within a socio-political context—and draws upon Israeli sociology, art history, and visual culture. In-depth personal interviews with the artists also inform the analysis.

Keywords

Visual art, Israel, Jerusalem, rituals, Judaism, Temple Mount

¹ Kibbutzim College, Tel Aviv, Israel.

Corresponding author:

Sigal Barkai, Kibbutzim College, Tel Aviv, Israel, Namir Road 149, Tel Aviv Jaffa 6250769, Israel.
E-mail: sigalbarkai@gmail.com

Introduction

In Israel, which has undergone a demographic and conceptual shift in the recent years, moving from the founding Zionist agendas to an ever-growing nationalist and religious piety, it is important to pay attention to what contemporary art has to say. The two artists whose art has been examined in this article, Yael Bartana and Nira Pereg, are ideologically rooted in the veteran Zionist elite who had advocated secularism, humanism, and universalism in the early days of Zionist settlement, beginning with the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Pereg and Bartana began their artistic activity at the turn of the current millennium. Their worldviews were shaped in the shadow of a major political trauma—the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, committed by a Jewish assassin in the name of a religious-nationalistic doctrine that sanctifies the historic land of Israel over peace treaties and reconciliation with the Palestinians.

The charged political climate that emerged in the wake of the assassination shook them deeply and motivated them to create art that sharply criticizes the religious worldviews that link the land of Israel exclusively to Jewish nationalism. Both artists subvert the national consensus and offer counter-voices to the religious-nationalist worldview.¹

In this article, I focus on two artworks by Pereg and Bartana that share a subject—the desire to rebuild the ancient Jewish Temple and to expedite redemption in the public space of Israel. Ever since the June War/Six-Day War of 1967, when the Temple Mount/Al-Haram al-Sharif came under Israeli control, there has been intense preoccupation in the Israeli society with the status of the Temple Mount on which the ancient Temple once stood.²

One could suggest several examples. A recent collection of essays titled *The Mount, the Dome and the Gaze* (Hazan, 2017) brings diverse points of view of the Jewish and Palestinian scholars and artists. A “Cry for Zion” conference held in Jerusalem by a mixed Jewish-Christian group in December 2018 dealt with the relevance of the Temple to Christian life (cryforzion.com). Further, a Jewish group has established The Temple Institute, an educational museum in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem dedicated to the “long-term goal to do all in our limited power to bring about the building of the Holy Temple in our time” (templeinstitute.org/about).

Among the groups preoccupied with the Temple Mount, the most militant and nationalist is the Temple Mount and Land of Israel Faithful Movement (referred to here by their popular name, the Temple Mount Faithful). The works of art discussed in this article focus on this phenomenon, not because it is widespread, but precisely because of its exceptional nature—to warn against extreme Jewish worldviews that might evolve to become more dominant in the future. According to a statement on the website of the Temple Mount Faithful, the group was established in order to realize the objective of “building of the Third Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in our lifetime in accordance with the Word of G-d and all the Hebrew prophets and the liberation of the Temple Mount from Arab (Islamic) occupation so that it may be consecrated to the Name of G-d” (templemountfaithful.org).

Of course, it is hard to ignore the explosive tension between the Jews and the Arabs regarding the Temple Mount, but this is not the subject of the article. The focus here is on the tensions and conflicts within the Israeli-Jewish society, highlighting in particular, the attitudes of these two artists through their unique interpretive voices. For Pereg and Bartana, the Temple Mount conundrum serves as a powerful metaphor for the debate over the future character of the Jewish society in Israel, and their artwork evokes “the tension between history and memory, between imagination and reality, between celestial Jerusalem and the temporal city” (Mack, 2017, p. 102).

Nira Pereg: Ancient Myths and Neurotic Fantasies

Nira Pereg is a political artist who regularly exhibits in prominent museums and galleries around the world (nirapereg.net/BIO). The artist’s interpretive gaze on the Israeli society is fundamental to her work. In the words of French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, “For Nira Pereg’s generation, this immediate space is socio-political, and the world she describes is the invisible machinery that generates exclusions and inclusions, a social universe laid bare” (Bourriaud, 2014, p. 29).

Pereg specializes in documentary film. She insists on shooting un-staged images drawn directly from reality, asserting that performance and narrative are already embedded in the conduct of real people in real space. She then edits the material using sophisticated digital techniques in a manner that emphasizes her personal political stance. Finally, she integrates the filmed and projected images, saturated with meanings, in an installation within the exhibition space.

Boris Groys, noted art critic, philosopher, and international curator, expounds on art documentation with respect to Pereg’s work:

The practice of documentation is always highly ambiguous: we never can know if what we document is something ‘out there,’ some ‘real’ story, something factually true, or is it, actually, our own process of documentation, subjective time of our own work of documenting life. This ambiguity makes every act of journalism suspicious. But within the framework of art, this kind of suspicion can be neutralized, because art is here precisely a way to thematize a tension between documented life and life in and through documentation. In art this ambiguity is revealed, and here lies the primary difference between documentation per se and art documentation. (Groys & Pereg, 2011)

Pereg’s camera focuses on the events in which she identifies “cracks” in the Israeli reality. Because she is an atheist and secular, she “always returns to the crossroads of religion, the religions that we have here, in this country—Islam, Christianity, Judaism.” She calls the actions she documents “forced performances” because each of the “performers” is forced by his or her beliefs to go on doing what he or she does: the religious believer, on the one hand, and the artist, on the other (N. Pereg, personal communication, August 14, 2017).

In her youth, Pereg was profoundly moved by the ideas and writings of the well-known scholar Leibowitz (1959). She believed that he promoted the separation of religion and state and supported a “state for all its citizens” in Israel. In light of this, she re-examined her ideas about the Jewish nation-state—ideas that had been absolute for her, such as the belief that Israel is the nation-state exclusively of the Jews.

Pereg’s artistic journey has been devoted to the attempt to expose her perception of the flaws and distortions in the consensual political beliefs in Israel. According to Pereg, her artistic process refreshes the thinking on issues at the heart of the state-religion paradigm. In practice, she chooses to document interactions she perceives as surreal “between something that was relevant 2,000 years ago and the desperate attempts to revive it today, and the ways in which it fails to succeed” (N. Pereg, personal communication, 14 August 2017).

Pereg’s works are filmed in locations of religious and political significance, primarily sacred architectural monuments where she traces repeated patterns of behavior. Through direct photography and manipulative editing, she isolates a moment of reality and offers it to the viewer’s interpretive eye in the art gallery space. Using digital and spatial techniques, she casts doubt on the premises underlying sites such as the Al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Old City of Jerusalem, and the Cave of the Patriarchs / Al-Haram al-Ibrahim in Hebron.

The documented footages of the religious, military, and tourist routines in these venues often reveal odd situations that are forced on the people who live their lives in these places and unquestionably accept their conventions. It could be a nun repeatedly cleaning the tomb of Jesus off the secretions of kisses and tears of the believers who reverently visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (nirapereg.net/-CLAIRE). This becomes even more complex when based on random political arrangements that were established without sufficient planning or forethought. An example of this is the case of the Palestinian who operates the muezzin’s prerecorded call in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, who has to be accompanied by three Israeli soldiers to the room where the recording is located as it penetrates the Jewish prayer space, thereby possibly endangering him in this politically-charged space. It is important to understand that the artist’s intention in this particular work is to show that although Jews throughout history were considered nonviolent, once they gained national and political control over the land, they became as dangerous as any other nation. Hence, Pereg here shows the Palestinian as the one who needs protection from the Jew (nirapereg.net/-ISHMAEL).

The filmed images reveal the worldviews and beliefs of the people who are forced to share these spaces. The artist gazes through secular eyes that cast doubt on the rituals at large, perhaps perceiving them as elaborate mechanisms designed to repress individuality and original thinking.

An Analysis of this Red Red Stuff (Kunsthalle Darmstadt, Germany, 2017) Exemplifies Pereg's Stance³

In this work, the artist explores the repeated attempts of the ultra-Orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians to raise a “red heifer” as part of the process of returning to the Temple Mount and striving for the establishment of the Third Temple. Pereg defines these groups as “very religious, very extreme, the most extreme in Israel” and describes how she approached them and asked for their consent to film them, which they immediately blocked (N. Pereg, personal communication, August 14, 2017).

The work is called *This Red Red Stuff* based on Chapter 25 in *Genesis* to suggest the struggle for primogeniture between Jacob and Esau. The artist connects this to the struggle over the Temple Mount between the Jews and the Muslims.⁴ As noted above, the long-term goal of the Temple Institute group is “to do all in our limited power to bring about the building of the Holy Temple in our time,” which would expedite redemption of the Jewish people. This can only happen, they believe, if the laws of purification related to the “red heifer” ceremony can be applied in the immediate present.⁵ According to the medieval Jewish sage Maimonides (The Rambam) there were nine red heifers in the past until the destruction of the Second Temple, and the tenth will be found when the Messiah arrives.⁶ The Bible lists the many attributes of the red heifer—it must, for example, be a 3-year-old cow that has never worked and has no white or black hair.⁷

What fascinates Pereg about this is the determination of the people living in the twenty-first century to search for such a heifer and to absorb it into the rituals and worship of the contemporary Jews. Following a series of “successes” in finding such a cow, subsequently deemed failures by them, she describes these attempts:

They began to declare that they had found a red heifer and since then they always find a cow and then disqualify it, find it and disqualify it. This is a neurotic process that may indicate their unwillingness, or their fear. In fact, it indicates their lack of readiness to discover the perfect red cow. This is an interesting dialogue between politics and religion, between some ancient myth and what is happening in today's reality. (N. Pereg, personal communication, August 14, 2017).

This Red Red Stuff was installed by Pereg in the large Darmstadt gallery space—10 × 20 meters (32.8 × 65.6 feet) and consisted of four documentary videos projected onto low, flat surfaces (1.57 × 2.8 meters, or 5.2 × 9.2 feet, each). The large scale of the space and the horizontal placement of the flat surfaces are designed to create, according to Pereg, a fragmented, multi-sensory, and baffling experience that cannot be deciphered in a continuous, linear way (N. Pereg, personal communication, 20 May 2019). This choice of installation seems to me to be a metaphor for the state of Israeli society—an experiential state in which events intersect simultaneously and collide at any given moment.

The first video, “So the Bible Says So,” examined the gaps between a mythic vision inscribed in the Holy Scriptures and the distortions in attempting to fulfil that vision in real time and space. Pereg took the instructions given in the Talmudic chapter *Masechet Para* and translated them into a digitally manipulated vision, producing fantastic illustrations typical of computer games—apocalyptic science fiction that is horrifying and intimidating. On the second surface, she screened “Fallen Heifers,” an archival collage depicting the endless efforts of extreme zealots to raise a perfect red cow in the immediate present. This odd activity of finding the proper newborn calf, raising it with great care, surrounded by media propaganda, and then realizing something went wrong and the heifer is no longer qualified and must go to the slaughterhouse—all this is recorded through media, Internet, and newspaper clippings and is meticulously preserved by one of the rabbis of the Temple Mount Faithful.

The third video, “No Sex for Cows,” records the process of drawing semen out of a bull, inseminating a cow, and the birthing of the calf. This cruel process is defined by the artist as “pornographic,” hence she placed a red filter on the entire footage in order to echo, in her view, the atmosphere of the “red light district” of Amsterdam (N. Pereg, personal communication, 20 May 2019).

On the fourth surface is a screening of “Just a Few Hundred Meters Away,” a staged ceremony of the sacrifices performed in the Temple in biblical times, a re-enactment done by Jewish believers at the Hurva Synagogue in the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem just before Passover—a performative ritual taking place as the worshipers repeatedly stress “just a few hundred meters away” from where the ancient holy Jewish Temple once stood. This work, filmed by the artist from within a crowd viewing the act, also reveals the chilling gap between a sacred vision and the twisted fulfillment of it on the ground in this day and age. The camera lingers on the slaughter of sheep during the ceremony and the blood flowing from them, the price that living creatures have to pay for religious performances and re-enactments, or for the fulfillment of visions that, in the artist’s opinion, should remain a textual proposition in the Scriptures and never fulfilled.

Just before the video loop ends, synchronized on the four tables, there is a simultaneous screening of a strange documentary scene: On a hot, humid day, three Israelis are standing on a Tel Aviv beach, surrounded by partying swimmers and beer drinkers, shouting repeatedly, “Messiah, reveal yourself! Messiah, reveal yourself!” This, in the artist’s mind, is the essence of the Israeli experience today (N. Pereg, personal communication, 20 May 2019).

After Pereg failed in her efforts to gain consent for shooting videos in collaboration with the Temple Mount Faithful leaders, she changed her strategy and added to the documentary films a three-dimensional animation she created depicting a “Chimera”⁸—in this case half red cow and half woman—with the facial features of the artist herself. Using digital technology, she scanned her body and face and combined it with the image of the red cow.⁹

The digital creature thus created circles, its axis endlessly at the center of the installation, always looking back and trying to get rid of a huge fly sitting on its back. From the gallery review:

This Red Red Stuff strays from Pereg's documentary tactics, by combining a semi-confessional position with a scholarly one, marking a paradigmatic shift in her mode of constructing a narrative. In merging utopian mediums such as 3D-animation with documentary footage, Pereg reflects on a seemingly esoteric phenomenon, which makes the bigger picture manifest.¹⁰

In my view, this strong metaphor relates to the artist's personal confessional statement regarding her involvement in the Israeli society as an atheist and secular Jew. Although she tries to shed religious rituals, they never fail to burden her and continue to "sit on her back."

The image of the "Chimera" adds repetition and movement to the spatial experience, while seeming to symbolize the artist's despair over the frustrating, cyclical process of attempting to create dialogue, not only with these specific zealots, but on a more general level between the secular and the religious Jews in Israel. The self-transformation of the artist into a "red heifer" might suggest that, like the heifers used for religious purposes who have no agency over their own fate and are destined to play a role in ancient rituals they have nothing to do with, this figure is an embodiment of the long-time debate over the "religious status quo" in Israel which forces secular Israelis to lead their lives according to the ancient rules and regulations of Biblical commandments forced on them by the religious establishment.¹¹ Examples of these regulations are the prohibition of public transport on the Sabbath and the monopoly of the Orthodox rabbinate on marriage and burial rites. Thus, the repetitive rotation of the woman-cow figure could be interpreted as a visual symbol of the discourse between seculars and religious Jews, which is not open to change, flexibility, or renewal in the contemporary Israeli reality.

Questions of purity, impurity, destruction, and redemption are not only significant philosophical and social questions, but they also touch upon the psyche and identity of every individual. The sober recognition that a perfect red heifer can never be produced echoes Pereg's search as an artist, woman, and human being who can never be satisfied, and is therefore destined to turn again and again on her axis. The fictitious connection she makes between the body of the cow and her own body implies her collective identification with the subjects of her research. Common recognition dawns there that it is impossible, even with genetic engineering, to ever reach perfection.

During her archival journey, Pereg met various figures—Messianic evangelicals, Jewish zealots, veterinarians, biologists, anthropologists, animation designers, and dairy farmers. This human repertoire partly represents the "others" of the artist herself. For example, in spite the fact that she herself is a Jew, she refers to the Jewish zealots as "others" to herself. As a *sabra* (native Israeli), she is puzzled by "those American Jews who came to Israel in the 1990s with an agenda of national-religious fulfillment" (N. Pereg, personal communication, 14 August 2017).¹²

In Pereg's documentary "No Sex for Cows" from *This Red Red Stuff*, an analogy could be drawn between the sterile and artificial process of breeding a

cow and how the Temple Mount Faithful aspire to rebuild the Temple—not as a natural and gradual process initiated by a people living on their own land, fertilizing it, and enjoying its flawless fruits, as in biblical times, but as an “artificial insemination” designed to expedite redemption in the consumerist globalist era.

Thus, *This Red Red Stuff* represents the tension between a collective messianic fantasy and private psychological neuroses. In this regard, Pereg notes the motivations for producing red heifers and subsequently disqualifying them:

It is possible to produce a red heifer, but it is also very easy to disqualify it, and within the halachic system, the forms of disqualification are so varied that they give you an opening to escape in a second, and that is what they do. In other words, if they find the red heifer, what will they do? After all, they do not have a Temple ... so until the political conditions allow for it, they continue to play treasure hunt games. (N. Pereg, personal communication, 14 August 2017)

Significantly, the artist’s approach is anthropological since the documentary footage screened in the exhibition is not staged but filmed with a “fly on the wall” approach, meaning a remote viewing that records events as they happen, without the artist’s intervention during the photo shoot. This archival approach is also manifested in the editing, which emphasizes “what was there.” In contrast to this strategy, the curation of the final work in the installation mixes the real and the imaginary, drawing the viewer into the actual space of the exhibition as an enveloping experience designed to provoke more profound interpretive engagement. The work creates meaning from its structural composition. The low tables on which the videos are projected horizontally create a kind of “field” that encourages the viewer to move around and become physically involved in a landscape-like geographic perspective of a specific place.

In contrast to the horizontal arrangement of these videos, the digital image of the woman-cow, that reddish hybrid rotating figure, is projected vertically. Centered on the back wall of the installation, it attracts the eye of the beholder to gaze in that direction. It is almost as if the fictional character looks down on the scene and responds to the recorded events. This placement seems to represent the position of the artist who does not remain indifferent to the socio-political content she records. On the contrary, Pereg identifies with the people and events so much that she herself becomes a “red cow.”

The artist’s deep involvement in what she documents stems from an ethical choice she has made to live in Israel, despite her harsh criticism of the Israeli-Zionist state.

As long as I’m here, I don’t have the privilege of dealing with something else, because the elephant in the room is so in front of me. I don’t have the privilege of turning my back on this elephant; it’s in my formation as a person, this union between being an artist and being a citizen is very important to me, art is part of my public activity, part of how I am as a citizen, of how I contribute to society. It’s a mimetic act that I want to focus on in my studio. (N. Pereg, personal communication, 14 August 2017)

Despite this statement, Pereg's work is emotionally restrained and wary of blatant, one-dimensional political messages. The artist allows the raw material of reality to seep gradually into the consciousness of the viewer, and thus delineate the political meanings. As an Israeli, her gaze emanates from her identity as a native and her identification with the land, with all its problems and complexities. She refers to her national identity as "an inheritance that I have to cope with" and, therefore, her artistic motivations are the theological and socio-political realities of Israel.

Yael Bartana: Apocalyptic Visions and Historical Cyclicity

Pereg lives in Israel most of the time but directs her messages mainly to an international audience. Yael Bartana, in contrast, left Israel in the mid-1990s, but despite all her years in the diaspora, she still continues to relate to her homeland in her art. The videos she produced in the 1990s were an ironic, integrated examination of Israeli-Jewish worldviews. Her monumental works seem to be oriented toward Israelis, who are more able than others to decipher the profound meanings, cultural nuances, and sardonic clues embedded in them.

Bartana's long-time engagement is to convey messages about the exploitation of the naiveté of the youth for political, ideological, and theological purposes. As someone affected by the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin as a teenager, Bartana seems to return again and again to that event that shaped her own and her generation's worldview and collective identity.

In *Assassination* (2011),¹³ for example, Bartana shows a group of young patriots mourning over the assassination of their leader. This ceremony echoes the Israeli Memorial Day rallies, the commemorations of the Holocaust by Israeli youth delegations in Poland, and the memorial ceremonies marking the murder of Rabin. In all these references, the artist oscillates between sincere identification with the devotion expressed by the youth and a cynical view of their exploitation by institutionalized systems.

The video *Inferno* (yaelbartana.com), which I analyze here, revolves around the same axis of meanings, where the worship of the Temple is a parable for the death and destruction of young lives.

Inferno (2013) addresses the myths and visions surrounding the Temple Mount. The Evangelical Church has a special attitude toward Israel, as many American evangelicals see themselves as Christian Zionists (Goldman, 2018). Within the evangelical stream, a new religion was founded in Brazil in 1977 by Bishop Edir Macedo who called it the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. Macedo, a wealthy media tycoon and businessman, decided to construct in São Paulo an exact replica of the ancient Temple, but over four times larger than the original. The grandiose structure is a reconstruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, which Macedo calls Templo de Salmão [The Temple of King Salomon] and is actually a copy of the later-day Herodian Temple. The building rises to a height of 11 floors and is covered with Jerusalem stone imported from Israel. The Jewish

symbols and ceremonies in this church derive from the Christian belief that the Old Testament is the cradle of Christianity (Romero, 2014).

Macedo's project attracted Bartana's attention so much that she decided to create a work of art based on it. She said that Pastor Macedo "embraced the film, which suited his messianic ideas" (Avidan, 2014). The understanding that the narrative of the Temple is not bound by historical truth and has a tremendous emotional impact not only on Jews, but internationally and inter-culturally, motivated Bartana to explore this phenomenon in the discussed artwork.

In her video, Bartana merges space and time into a parable about the cycle of history and the repetition of human behavior. The video is both a cynical parody and, on the other hand, a moving emotional performance. The aesthetic strategies and visual rhetoric of the video are eclectically drawn from different genres such as Hollywood action films, historical melodramas, and apocalyptic science fiction.

The video opens with a view from a helicopter approaching the *favelas* [shanties] on the outskirts of São Paulo. Hanging by a rope from the helicopter is a large, unidentified object. Youth clad in white gather from side streets onto the main avenue carrying baskets on their shoulders, their heads adorned with elaborate bouquets of flowers and fruits. They are gazing at the sky with anticipation. Suddenly, three helicopters approach, carrying what every Jew recognizes as the sacred ritual objects of the Temple in Jerusalem—the Ark of the Covenant with the winged cherubim on top, the altar, and the six-branched candelabrum. In a dramatic scene, the young men and women wave excitedly at the aircraft. The spectacle is captivatingly beautiful. Girls and boys of various ethnicities who sometimes look like Brazilians and sometimes like Israelis flock to the Temple. The sweet, chilling melody of the Jewish prayer *Avinu Malkeinu*¹⁴ accompanies them. A close-up view brings us into the luxurious, sacred space of the Temple (the set was built in a large hangar that serves as a school for teaching samba, since the building was not completed at the time). The young people sing and dance and are attentive to a religious ceremony full of glory. They listen mesmerized to the High Priest's prayer, a role played by a well-known drag queen in Brazil, with his stark black skin and hypnotic green eyes. During the ceremony, the camera moves slowly across the devoted, enthusiastic faces of the naive young believers.

Suddenly, a fire from Hell erupts from the cherubim on the ark. The terrified crowd runs amok—screaming for help and trampling one another in their attempt to escape. The floor cracks open, the gates of the underworld open, and helpless bodies fall through, in enactment of the Christian interpretation of the inferno of Hell. In the event, depicted in slow motion, one sees flying baskets, windows smashing, and flames raging out of control. The screen capture of the video, filmed from above, evokes destruction and death. The Temple has been completely destroyed and bodies are strewn everywhere. The predominant color of this devastation is the brown-gray of ash and dust. It looks like the scene of a terrorist attack. The High Priest, who is unharmed, remains detached, indifferent to the catastrophe surrounding him.

In accordance with the earlier works by Bartana such as *Trembling Time* (2001), *Kings of the Hill* (2003) or *Low Relief* (2004),¹⁵ which harshly criticized

militarism in the Israeli daily life, I see this apocalyptic (digitally manipulated) scenario as a tragic-ironic parody about establishments that use the threat of war, death, and destruction to exploit their young followers or, in the case of Israel, to recruit the next generation of soldiers.

The epilogue of *Inferno* shows the image of a new Western Wall, the only remains of the Brazilian temple. In this new Western Wall plaza, merchants and peddlers sell souvenirs with Jewish symbols. A new Jesus wanders among the worshipers and tourists. History is over but is repeating itself. The circle is closed, the fiction is revealed.

Similar to Pereg's somber view of the religious establishment, Bartana suggests that religions always lead to the same story end, time and again condemned to violent destruction, only to rise again as a consumer product wrapped in kitsch and sentimentalism. Her approach is influenced by the "politics of aesthetics," a term coined by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, which encourages the subject to lay bare all that the political establishment, represented by "police," would like to remain unseen. In Rancière's words, "The essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make visible the world of its subjects and its operations. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus" (Rancière, 2010, p. 37).

In an interview, Bartana described her motivation for creating *Inferno* and how she sees and interprets reality:

Jacques Rancière talked about 'fictionalizing.' One changes something small in reality to produce a fiction that enables a fresh perception of reality. This is the move that interested me; it's as if someone throws a boomerang and someone else catches it and returns it. This tension between reality and fiction interests me, when the fiction becomes reality and reality, fiction. This is precisely what fascinates me. (Y. Bartana, personal communication, 8 September 2017)

Rancière claims that there is a distinction between art as an immediate political force in the community and art that uses the aesthetics of representation to make a political statement. In this spirit, Bartana's work re-examines the relations between social symbols and images. Rancière suggests that impersonation is a good strategy to raise awareness of false social norms that are perceived as the "truth" (Rancière, 2004, 2010). Bartana's work shows how fiction can expose the exploitation of innocent believers and young minds.

It is my contention that Bartana successfully exposes the social fiction in *Inferno* through the aesthetic elements of the work: the meticulous photography, the dramatic mise-en-scène, and the spectacular digital manipulation, which offer the viewer a messianic vision tinged by dark irony and a grim prophecy about any future attempt to rebuild the Temple. She uses the camera manipulatively to lure in the viewer, the lens caressing the beautiful young faces praying in the Temple, the white and golden colors of the Temple mystically glowing, and the sweet music of the prayer thrilling the viewer in irresistible ways, just moments before the entire structure collapses in a vicious and cruel way. From the height of

ecstasy, the youngsters are plunged into the darkness of disillusionment and the bitter understanding that everything was a lie.

In this *Inferno* production, the ancient Jewish ritual and history shifts in space and time to a Christian Brazil of the twenty-first century. Although the work touches upon the mythic beliefs of diverse religions and cultures, the metaphors, surprisingly, are for the most part a direct criticism of the Israeli-Jewish-secular-left-wing society. These Israelis were, in fact, Bartana's initial reference group. This cinematographic statement echoes a sense of disillusionment that prevailed in Israeli society after the October War/Yom Kippur War in 1973. Underlying Bartana's biography, an individual who grew up in a well-established agricultural community of Zionist farmers in Israel's Jezreel Valley, lies the sober and cynical worldview of those who experienced the trauma of the Yom Kippur War. Her criticism of the war may be derived from this, along with a similar sense of disillusionment as Pereg's, since both belong to the post-Rabin era. In her words, "You need first to be a Zionist in order to become a post-Zionist" (Y. Bartana, personal communication, 8 September 2017).

Bartana's background and her pre-occupation with her own disappointments and traumas which led her to leave Israel and live in Europe since 2006 are evident here and suggest that the destroyed Temple is a metaphor for what she perceives to be the destruction of the Jewish secular, humanistic, socialistic vision of equality and peace, namely the collapse of the Zionist state.

Bartana's neo-diasporic experience has resulted in her seeing everything as relative—there is no absolute truth. As an artist whose identity shifts and diffuses between various national, gender, professional, and geographic definitions, she casts doubt on all social roles, histories, beliefs, and myths, exposing them as fictitious performances. To her, the way to lay bare the constitutive narratives of a particular society is to place them in a foreign historical and geographic context to reveal their lack of authenticity. In the interview, Bartana stated, "I am very interested in creating social experiments through cinema, changing reality, seeing what is happening and documenting it. I am a documentary filmmaker of Fiction-Reality" (Y. Bartana, personal communication, 8 September 2017).

Contrary to Nira Pereg's belief in the objective documentation of the "outside" world, Bartana adheres to Rancière's statement that there is no "real world" that is documentary art. Pereg and Bartana chose to live and work in different places. Pereg lives in Israel and travels regularly to show her work abroad. Bartana, on the other hand, has been wandering for many years between different national geographies, shifting and manipulating her identities accordingly. These choices have influenced how these artists represent the aesthetics of Israel and the Middle East in their artwork. Unlike Pereg, who uses strategies that show reality "as is," Bartana celebrates the fiction and leads her viewers into confusion and disorientation about what is fact and fiction, past and present, myth and reality, time and space, in her unraveling of religious beliefs and national constructs.

Despite the principal differences between the two artists, both share one common motif. The cyclical repetition of time is a central element in the work of both these artists. As in the case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in which the victim is living in circular time and experiences the traumatic event

over and over again, Pereg and Bartana deploy the visual semiotics of repetition that returns to the same point of departure. In a post-traumatic place such as the State of Israel, in which war occurs again and again every few years, similar to the war that preceded it and the one that follows, the two artists subconsciously represent the traumatic approach to life typical of Israeli natives.

In this article, I tried to show how art represents the history and sociology of a specific place and time, but at the same time is a universal form of reflection and contemplation about “everywhere” and “anytime.” Artistic sensitivity could be put to use as a perceptive and elaborate tool for analyzing socio-psychologically baffling political enigmas. In other words, art and art history can make a significant contribution to the study of peoples and places, while acknowledging the tensions “between history and memory, between imagination and reality,” and between the celestial and the temporal.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. These conclusions are based on personal interviews with the artists conducted during the author’s postdoctoral research at Concordia University in 2017–2018 and with Pereg in May 2019.
2. Shragai (1995) recounts the history of the Jewish struggle over the Temple Mount since 1967 and demonstrates that this issue continues to fester and remain prominent on the agenda of contemporary Israeli society.
3. See http://www.kunsthalle-darmstadt.de/Program_3_1_gid_1_pid_286.html
4. From the artist’s page in the gallery website: “In Genesis chapter 25 verse 30 it is written, ‘And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff for I am exhausted!’” Esau proceeds to exchange his invaluable status as the first-born son, for a red lentil stew. In the current Israeli political landscape, Jewish movements and Israeli Parliament members themselves call for the construction of the Third Temple on the site of the Muslim Dome of the Rock. Their claims for ownership are based on the same status of chronological precedence—we were here first.” <https://bravermangallery.com/news/nira-pereg-solo-sow-this-red-red-stuff-at-kunsthalle-darmstadt-in-darmstadt/>
5. This ritual is explained in “Ask the Rabbi” on the website of Or Somayach yeshiva in Jerusalem: “According to the Torah, someone who comes into contact with a dead body becomes *halachically* ‘impure.’ The Torah describes a very specific process that enables a person to purify himself. This process involves slaughtering a heifer that is completely red, burning it, and mixing its ashes with water. Some of this ‘purifying water’ is sprinkled on the impure person twice over a 7-day period” (https://ohr.edu/explore_judaism/ask_the_rabbi/ask_the_rabbi/6737).
6. Mishneh Torah of the Rambam, Sefer Tahara, Laws of the Red Heifer, Chapter 3, Halakha 4.

7. In the Book of Numbers [Bamidbar] Chapter 19.
8. In ancient mythology, a chimera is a hybrid creature composed of several animals.
9. See <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/141193/nira-pereg-this-red-red-stuff/>
10. See <https://bravermangallery.com/news/nira-pereg-solo-sow-this-red-red-stuff-at-kunsthalle-darmstadt-in-darmstadt/>
11. According to a 2018 report by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 45 per cent of Israeli Jews defined their way of life as secular, 25 per cent as traditional, 16 per cent as very religious, and 14 per cent as ultra-Orthodox. Yet, because of various political deals, secular Israelis are forced by the religious minority to adhere to many religious practices in the name of the "religious status quo."
12. On the role of Jews of North American descent in the establishment of the national-religious ideologies in Israel, see Hirschhorn (2012).
13. *And Europe Will Be Stunned/Zamach (Assassination)*, 2011, one-channel video and sound installation, 35 min. <http://yaelbartana.com>
14. *Avinu Malkenu* is a Jewish prayer that includes about 40 requests and supplications, all of which begin with a plea to God in the words of "Our Father, our King." The Prayer read aloud in the synagogue on the 10 days of repentance and fasting on the first day of the Holy Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.
15. See yaelbartana.com

References

- Avidan, I. (2014, February 18). An 'Inferno' erupts at the Berlin film festival. *The Times of Israel*. Retrieved from <https://www.timesofisrael.com/an-inferno-erupts-at-the-berlin-film-festival/>
- Bourriaud, N. (2014). Nira Pereg frontier zones. In P. Salmona, N. Bourriaud, R. Zagury-Orly, J. Cohen & N. Bourriaud, (Eds.), *Nira Pereg: Abraham Abraham and Sarah Sarah*. Paris: Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme (pp. 24–29).
- Goldman, S. (2018). *God's country: Christian Zionism in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Groys, B., & Pereg, N. (2011). *The hard pulse of regularity*. In *Nira Pereg: Kept alive*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Retrieved from http://nirapereg.net/nira/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Boris-Groys_The-Hard-Pulse-of-Regularity_Kept-Alive.pdf
- Hazan, N. (Ed.). (2017). *Mount, the Dome and the gaze: The Temple Mount in Israeli visual culture*. Haifa: Pardes.
- Hirschhorn, S. Y. (2012). *City on a hilltop: The participation of Jewish-American immigrants within the Israeli settler movement, 1967–1987* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
- Leibowitz, Y. (1959). Separation of religion and state. *B'terem*, 259–260. Retrieved from <http://www.leibowitz.co.il/leibarticles.asp?id=30>
- Mack, M. (2017). Imagination, memory and fantasy. In N. Hazan (Ed.), *Mount, the Dome and the gaze: The Temple Mount in Israeli visual culture* (pp. 101–110). Haifa: Pardes.
- Rancière, J. (2004). *The politics of aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible*. London, UK and New York, NY: Continuum.
- Rancière, J. (2010). *Dissensus: On politics and aesthetics (trans. S. Corcoran)*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Shragai, N. (1995). *The Mount of quarrel: The struggle for the Temple Mount: Jews and Muslims, religion and politics since 1967*. Tel Aviv: Keter Books.
- Romero, S. (2014). *The Third Temple Rises in Brazil,*". New York Times. [In Hebrew].