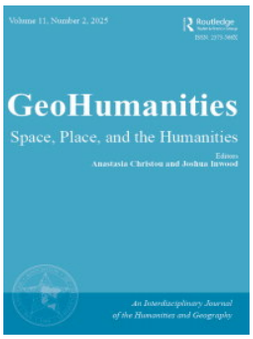

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FORUM ON TERRITORIAL MEMORY: POLITICAL INTERVENTIONS, SPATIAL CONTESTATIONS

The Redemption of Berlin's Memory Landscapes: Yael Bartana's *Malka Germania*

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This article delves into the work of contemporary visual artist Yael Bartana, focusing on her recent artwork, the monumental video work *Malka Germania* (2021). Amidst the constant struggle over politics, commemoration, and territoriality in Berlin's memory landscape, Bartana's art emerges as a critical and thought-provoking intervention. By leaning on interviews with the artist, observations from exhibitions, as well as a thorough analysis of the video work itself, I propose an interpretation of *Malka Germania* as a radical rethinking of Berlin's memory landscapes. I argue that the work not only reframes struggles over memory, but also materialises them as territorial struggles.
Key Words: art, Berlin, memory landscapes, memory work, redemption, Yael Bartana.

1. INTRODUCTION

After seizing power in January 1933, the Nazis systematically erased the Jewish people and landscape, along with other groups deemed unworthy of inclusion in the Reich. Streets, squares, and other places became the scene of physical fascist violence, which, together with what Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu (2010, 460) call "toponymic cleansing," "Aryanized" the Third Reich landscape. Hundreds of concentration camps opened in 1933 in Berlin alone, producing a landscape so accommodating to terror and persecution that "Nazi thugs" could "drag their victims into one of these camps" in just a few minutes (Wachsmann 2015, 36–37).

Following the end of World War II, the past atrocities remain in what has been described as a "holocaust landscape" (Cook and van Riemsdijk 2014; Cole 2016), or as "the geographical and psychological landscapes of the aftereffects of the Nazi genocide" (Kaplan 2011, 1). This is manifested in the form of individual memorials, like the *Stolpersteine*: bronze stumble-stones installed by German artist Günther Demnig to mark the place of an individual's site of

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deportation or murder (see Cook and van Riemsdijk 2014; Drozdzewski 2018). It also comes in the form of state-run institutions, such as the *Topographie des Terrors*, a museum demarcating the ruins of the SS and Gestapo headquarters (see Till 2005). Beyond sites of curated remembrance, the Holocaust landscape also exists as an ambiguous haunting of Berlin in itself, where every structure, statue, and strip of land "shed light on a collective identity that is more felt than articulated" (Ladd 1997, 2).

It is in this context the visual artist Yael Bartana intervenes with *Malka Germania* (2021), a monumental video work which explores the question of what it would mean if the past landscape—both the Jewish and that of the Third Reich—returned. In this article I provide an analysis of Malka Germania through which I argue for understanding it as a radical rethinking of the Holocaust memory landscapes of Berlin, where Bartana's work takes struggles over memory and (symbolically) materialises them as territorial struggles.

The following section (2) provides a contextual background on Bartana and her work. The methods section (3) outlines and discusses the empirical materials and methods employed. Following this, the article delves into its theoretical underpinnings (4), exploring geography, art, and the theme of redemption. Subsequently, the main analysis of Malka Germania ensues (5), leading to the article's conclusion (6), where a synthesis of the overarching argument is given.

2. YAEL BARTANA: THE ARTIST AND THE ARTWORK

Born in Israel in 1970, Bartana is an Amsterdam- and Berlin-based artist whose work mainly consists of photography and video installations blending fiction and reality to envision alternative understandings and critical imaginations of the past, present, and future. Bartana embodies the role of both artist and filmmaker. As such, she defies easy comparison with other artists. Bartana shares a penchant for intricate narratives, allegorical storytelling, and cinematic aesthetics with the American artist Matthew Barney, as seen in his 2019 film *Redoubt* (Barney 2019). A parallel could also be made to the Swedish artist Ann-Sofi Sidén, whose conceptual horseback road movie *3 MPH—Horse to Rocket* (2003) and its 2010 sequel *My Country (Somewhere in Sweden)* show a similar preoccupation with the human condition within landscapes as Bartana's works (see Hubbard 2003; Hedlin Hayden 2005). Perhaps the most poignant comparison is the English artist Jeremy Deller whose filmed live (re)enactments *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) and *We're Here Because We're Here* (2016), places past injustices and trauma in the landscape of the present (see Kollectiv and Kollectiv 2007; Sinclair 2016).[1]

Since the early 2000s, Bartana has explored the relationship between the displacement of people and landscapes, and their possible return. Much of this work, regularly exhibited in prominent galleries and museums across the world, takes on Jewish diaspora in a range of geographic contexts in Europe and beyond. In Poland, Bartana created one of her most significant works, the so-called 'Polish trilogy' *And Europe Will Be Stunned* (2007–2011), which in 2011 was chosen to represent Poland at the 54th Venice Biennale, marking the first time a non-Polish national received such an honour.[2] The choice, and the work itself, sparked intense scholarly interest, resulting in numerous publications analysing the work (e.g., Blacker 2014; Pantenburg 2012; Simblist 2011; Sliwinska 2013; Synenko 2017; Underhill 2011). It also created political controversy, as exemplified by how then Israeli Culture and Sports Minister Limor Livnat initially refused to visit the Polish pavilion due to the supposed anti-Zionism in Bartana's call for

yerida—a reverse *aliyah* (see Rosenblum 2011).[3] The trilogy is comprised of three long-form video works and installations taking aim at Poland's relationship with the Holocaust and to its lost Jewry. It does so by staging a fictional (re)settler movement calling for three million Jews to "come back" to Poland, through, among other things, the re-construction of a Kibbutz-like structure placed in a Warsaw park that formed part of the ghetto during the Holocaust (Bartana 2010). More than mirroring the Kibbutz, the structure also merges the architecture of the concentration camp with the *Ḥoma u'migdal* ("wall and tower")—a fortification type used by Zionist settlers as territorial countermeasure during the late 1930s in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine (see Azoulay et al. 2003).

Bartana's artistry is rooted in her own dual heritage of, on the one side, having been raised in an Israeli "secular, patriotic, labor movement and militant atmosphere," and on the other side, realising her own Jewishness, and "becoming" a Jew, only after leaving her homeland for Europe (Harten and Lersch 2021). This is manifested in a series of self-portraits from 2015 titled *Herzl*, in which Bartana fuses her own identity with that of Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), the father of political Zionism—a work she describes as "metaphoric of the Herzlian move from fiction to fact and from utopian heaven to the desert of the real" (yaelbartana.com). Herzl is an interesting figure in his own right, but more importantly, he is key to unlocking the meaning and intertextuality of Bartana's work. On the title page of Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland* ("Old New Land," 1902), appears a quote: *Wenn Ihr wollt, Ist es kein Märchen* ("If you wish it, it is no fairy-tale"). In her work, Bartana has continuously made use of the quote, connecting it to her idea that one can intercept in the path of history. According to her, this is also the purpose of her work: using her own concept of *pre-enactment* by staging "pseudo-historical situations" and proposing "future events that may become historical realities" (Jüdisches Museum Berlin 2021).[4] Thus, the method of pre-enacting history essentially entails paraphrasing Herzl's evergreen: *if you pre-enact it, maybe it'll happen! If you wish it, it is no fairy-tale!* By doing so, Bartana reverses Herzl's *Old New Land* into a question: what if the Old Land is the New? What if the Jews could, or should, come back to Europe, the landscape of their attempted erasure?[5]

Some years ago, when the Jewish Museum in Berlin proposed to arrange a retrospective of Bartana's work, she accepted on the condition that they would commission a new work from her, this time focusing on Germany and Berlin. This resulted in *Malka Germania*, a 43-minute long three-channel video installation, which became the centrepiece of the extensive retrospective *Redemption Now*, opening in June 2021 (Figure 1), and the focal point of this article.

3. METHODS: EXPLORING ART AS GEOGRAPHY

This study leans on geohumanities as both methodology and method, continuing from what Hawkins (2020, 95) describes as "the early 21st-century intensification of the relationship between geographical research and practice on the one hand and arts and humanities research and practice on the other." This entails recognizing geohumanities as both a way of seeing and understanding the world, by emphasising creativity and transdisciplinarity, and a toolset for doing so, by focusing on creative collaboration and explorative dialogue between geographer and (in this case) artist (de Leeuw 2022, 97).

The article is based on a qualitative examination of the practice of Yael Bartana, and her video installation *Malka Germania* (2021). The primary data, collected between June 2021 and

FIGURE 1 Malka Germania. Redemption Now exhibition view, 2021, JMB, photo: Jens Ziehe.

February 2024, consists of observations of the artwork as well as interviews with Bartana. Inspired in part by Rose's (2016) way of studying visual material as sites and modalities, I have observed Malka Germania both as an image—the meanings, evocations, symbolisms, and composition—and the context of its production and exhibition—the creation, curation, location, and display.

In September 2021, I made four visits to Bartana's exhibition *Redemption Now* at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, where *Malka Germania* premiered. I prepared for the visits by reading the exhibition documentation, the accompanying artist book, and the podcast published by the museum (Jüdisches Museum Berlin 2021; Bartana, Harten, and Lersch 2021; Gödde, Harten, and Lersch 2021). At every visit, I carefully observed the artwork, as well as how it was situated in relation to the rest of the exhibition. I did this by extensive notetaking, photographic documentation, and drawings of the exhibition layout. My intention with the research design was to embrace the artist's perspective and voice, considering both the arts and the impact of space and place (de Leeuw 2022, 97). To do this, I mapped the locations featured in the artwork, allowing me to explore them in between visits to the exhibition. Following an artist talk organized by the museum, I was able to meet Bartana. While this encounter contributed little to the form of actual interview data, it provided an opportunity to explain the purpose of my study, and to ask Bartana whether she was interested in being the subject of study. Following this, Bartana sent me the full video work *Malka Germania*, which facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the artwork, conducted outside the confines of the exhibition space. Later, in February 2024, I made two visits to her exhibition *Things to Come* at Gammel Strand in Copenhagen, Denmark, where *Malka Germania* was screened. Additional meetings have also taken place in Sweden, in connection with Bartana's exhibition at Cecilia Hillström Gallery in Stockholm (April 2022), group shows at Norrköpings konstmuseum (September 2022) and Moderna Museet in Malmö (November 2022), and in Italy, during her *Rome Prize* residency at the German Academy Villa Massimo in Rome (October 2023). In addition to in-person interactions, various forms of online communication tools have also been used.

While some of my encounters with Bartana took the form of semi- or unstructured interviews, others are difficult to categorize—but just as important. All of them functioned to understand how the artist "come[s] to perceive but also construct" their own work (Sjöholm 2014, 507). The purpose of this research design has been to emphasize the importance of flexibility, of going with the flow, of allowing data collection to be improvised, and of simply "trying" something without knowing where it will take you (de Leeuw and Magrane 2019, 148). Some of the most informative and interesting material was "collected" when walking between a mall and a sandwich shop in Malmö, when catching a ride from Norrköping to Stockholm with Bartana's Swedish gallerist, or through casual conversations on WhatsApp and Instagram.

Instead of being directed by an interview guide, my interactions with Bartana are better described as "participatory dialogues" (Ingold 2011, 241) or a form of "paraethnography" (Hawkins 2021, 19; Strohm 2012), where "interpretation and questioning go both ways" (D'Alleva 2012, 160). Over the years, this mode of working has resulted in a certain level of trust and mutual understanding, allowing a collaborative interpretation of Bartana's art (through theory), and a discussion of theory (through her art), as evident in some of the dialogue quotes used in section five.

4. REDEMPTION… HOW? COUNTERING THE HOLOCAUST LANDSCAPE THROUGH ART

4.1. Geography and Art

The relationship between art and geography has deep historical roots, dating back to the origins of the discipline itself. Throughout the centuries, this connection has taken various forms,

including instances where artists accompanied geographers on expeditions and participated in surveying activities, which played a pivotal role in establishing the discipline (Hawkins 2017). As the discipline developed, art and artists became integral, particularly in the growth of the subfield of humanistic geography (Seamon and Lundberg 2017), and the more recent emergence of geohumanities (Daniels et al. 2012; Dear et al. 2011; Hawkins 2020). One of the ways in which this continued attention is manifested is through the study of the "makings and shapings of worlds, subjects and knowledge" of art and artistic practices (Hawkins 2017, 4).

Ingram (2019), building on Rancière (2002, 2010) and Bleiker (2009a, 2009b), argues that art enables an indirect analysis and political examination, without the need to be explicit. Similarly, Tuan (2014, 205) sees art as "serving the geographer" as a thought experiment somewhere "between the objective and the subjective" (Tuan 2014), enabling us to "explore other spatializations and other topologies" and stimulate "geographical imaginations that can enlarge and enhance our sense of the world" (Gregory 2004, 262). Art allows the use of a fiction of sorts, that breaks from "the normal regime of the sensible" (Rancière 2002, as quoted in Ingram 2019, 43). Rancière (2010, 141) emphasises that fiction does not imply something imaginary, and as such opposed to reality, but rather a "re-framing of the 'real.'" Like Tuan's notion of fiction unveiling landscape experiences, art can reshape and challenge experiences and relationships "between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective" (Rancière 2010, 141). It is precisely this Bartana allows for, as her visual narratives connect with landscapes both real and imagined, past and present.

4.2. Redemption … How?

Exploring Bartana's artistic landscape reveals how prevalent the theme of redemption is in her works. Consequently, this article necessitates a discussion on the concept of redemption, particularly within the context of Jewish philosophy. Jewish thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, and Gershom Scholem came to conceptualize what Mosès (2009, 13) calls a "radically different dimension of historical consciousness and its utopian dimension." The reason for this was a collective disassociation from the Western idea of history as a continuous enlightenment, as the aftershock of World War I shattered any progressive promise of a German nation-state. This disassociation took different forms. For Scholem, inspired by both anarchism and Zionism, it meant focusing on the relationship between Jews and the nation, which for him did not mean supporting the concept of the nation-state (be it a German one, or a Jewish one), nor that of a strong national culture. Instead, Scholem suggested the idea of a "spiritual Zionism," which dismissed the idea of an ethno-religious Jewish nation state, in favour of an "internal renaissance of the Jewish people"—that is, Zionism decoupled from the concept of the nation-state (Mosès 2009, 18).[6] Memory *as*—not *of*—territory?

Rosenzweig used the linguistic term of *dissimilation* to describe what he saw as a constant parallel movement of the Jewish people in Europe: dissimilation coupled with assimilation (Mosès 2009, 19). That is, an oscillation between belonging and unbelonging, produced both by the Self and the Other, voluntary and forced. In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig ([1921] 2004) argued that time is not to be understood as a linear progression, but as a dynamic interaction between the past, present, and future. In other words, the future is not predetermined but moulded by the choices and actions of humans in the present. Rosenzweig, Scholem, and

Benjamin opposed thinkers like Fichte and Hegel who attempted to characterize Germany and its people as "chosen," tasked with realizing historical progress through the nation and culture. Rosenzweig argued that the opposition to this should not entail mirroring the esoteric mystique of the nation-state's superiority, but instead a contrast; a dissimilated alternative, in which history and time is conceptualized differently (Mosès 2009, 30). As such, an alternative to the determinist paradigm of history is key, which for Rosenzweig meant envisioning (and living) another history (Mosès 2009, 41).

Rosenzweig wanted to challenge "the time and territory of the nations" where the non-sequential "active waiting" for redemption "could finally uncouple time from the force of territorial expansion," in the words of Dubow (2016, 536). Additionally, Dubow (2021, 14–15) stresses how Rosenzweig's and Benjamin's perception of space can be coupled with critical cultural geography, allowing us not only to problematize the territorial, but to radically rethink its meaning, by leaning on a "shared ontology of Judaic spatiality and the critical imagination," where exile is both a geography as well as a mode of critical thinking. This is evident in Bartana's artistic vision, which—as I see it—is much indebted to Benjamin and his understanding of time. Through his concept "messianic time," Benjamin (1969, 263) argued that redemption would originate through a revolutionary transformation of the present—the moment of *Jetztzeit* (*now-time*)—rather than in a future salvation. As such, Benjamin (1969) differs between the historicist's view of history as having a linear and "causal connection between [its] various moments" (258), and the one envisioned by himself, that of "a conception of the present as the 'time of the now'" (263) powered by the pile of historic trauma that is the past. Buck-Morss (1981, 54) has noted Benjamin's insistence on proposing a view of history through which "fascism can become visible," a view whose success depended on the development of a "revolutionary consciousness" in order to act when the time is now—and stop it.[7] Such an arresting of time, Benjamin noted, occurred during the first evening of the French Revolution of 1830, when "clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris" (Benjamin 1969, 262).

Moreover, for Benjamin, aesthetics functions as the merger between theology and politics. That is, the dialectical image forms a lens through which one can understand the new idea of history. In a discussion about Benjamin's conceptualization of the artwork, Weigel (2013, 217) notes that for Benjamin, pictures push the production of a critical awareness, in the way that "artworks are mnemonic images that in the process of perception remind us of something that cannot yet be expressed in language." Buck-Morss (1981, 70) explains Benjamin's belief in the importance of art in the pursuit of societal change, noting that "art provided a critical iconography for deciphering material history, so that its elements might enter into a revolutionary constellation with the present." That is, in Benjamin's view, both the artist and revolutionary could act as the liberators of time from history, and not only that, as Buck-Morss (1981, 54) notes, "everything depended on" them stepping up to the task.

Redemption must settle any debts produced, which, in Bartana's conception, means asking the questions: "What if the past didn't take place exactly as it did?" and "What if the future is created differently, utilising the memories and utopias of the present and past?" Questions like these ties to Bartana's concept of *pre-enactment*, which connects to how *to redeem* is to bring into some (especially a former) condition or state, to restore, to set right again. Bartana does not create a former state, however, but a different, imagined (wished, even?) state. So, by way of pre-enactment, redemption creates not a different past, but a different potential future, by

changing the meaning of the past. To pre-enact is to redeem, and thus to actualize a revolutionary possibility, from the past for the future in the present.[8]

In Benjamin's concept of history, no part of the past is irretrievable or lost, but rather part of the flurry that is history. As such, an event (or, an artwork) can (re)actualize moments of the past to make past wrongs right (see Mosès 2009, 125). It is through such an appearance of a flash of the past in the present that a potential for utopia comes into reach, or as Mosès (2009, 125) puts it: the "revolutionary transformation" of the past produces a "projection of utopia into the present." Benjamin (1991a, 1245) imagines redemption as induced by the past retrieved into the present, and the idea of utopia as possibility, leading to what Mosès (2009, 126) understands as a complete "*un-knotting* of the paradoxes of the present." That is, redemption through pre-enactment can be understood as a comprehensive Adornean "working through the past" in the present, combined with a utopian—pseudo-Herzlian?—"working through the future" (see Adorno 2005, 89–103, and note 9).

Struggles over the past exist beyond the narrative and symbolic realm: they are also struggles over land. Acknowledging this entails going beyond spatial remembrance, such as memorials, to understand how manifestations of memory and history "make and mark territory" (Meyer and Norgaard 2022, 1396). Territory is here understood not as bounded or as container, but rather as a complex process involving the material, the political, the historical, and the mnemonic constantly at work (e.g., Elden 2010; Meyer and Norgaard 2022). The territorialization of memory, what Meyer and Norgaard (2022) calls "mnemonic land war," can thus entail the struggle to claim land, place, and memory through the creation of a radically different geography, or through the production of a critical counter-topography (Katz 2001, 2011), where the past as landscape is remade and "reperformed" (Meyer and Norgaard 2022, 1398).

5. *MALKA GERMANIA* TAKES BERLIN

> BARTANA: [My work] deals with reality, [with] redemption, and the wish for change. This is kind of the main motivation for many of my works, the wish to change reality, to create an alternative history, to pre-enact history. I was extremely charged when the Jewish Museum invited me to do a work, and I said that I want to do it in Berlin … of course I had already many ideas how I would like to change Germany, maybe even for me to feel better. And to think of redemption, how can one actually overcome history? The *Vergangenheitsbewältigung.*
>
> AUTHOR: Which Adorno talked about, the process of working through the past.[9]
>
> BARTANA: Yeah. Because, instead of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung,* I want to introduce the concept of *Zukunftsbewältigung*.
>
> AUTHOR: Working through the future?
>
> BARTANA: Yes.
>
> (Author's interview with Bartana, Malmö, 2022-11-01)

Malka Germania centres around a Messiah-like figure navigating the streets of present-day Berlin as some form of redemptive rupture (the rapture?) takes place around her. At one point, Malka (the title character) is shown arriving by donkey to Berlin's *Brandenburger Tor*, setting the tone for a work filled to the brim with symbolism and evocation. Unlike Jesus on his path to

redemption, Malka enters the gate from west to east, unaccompanied by a crowd of followers and without anyone awaiting her arrival. Instead, she passes through the gate to the melancholic sound of a waltz by Dmitri Shostakovich, performed by a heavily tattooed organ grinder—a nod towards the joyful innocence of the Weimar era. The name *Malka Germania* is a multi-layered play on words: «Malka», meaning *queen* in Hebrew, and «Germania», meaning *Germany*. Malka is also a reference to the female version of the Messiah, "Malka Meshicha" (Bartana et al. 2021, 11). Germania is also a reference to the intended name for Berlin, after its planned post-World War II redevelopment into *Welthauptstadt Germania* ("World Capital Germania")—the never-realized pet project of Adolf Hitler and his architect Albert Speer with the aim of finally constructing a "Great German Metropolis" like Rome or Paris.[10] Has the Messiah arrived in Berlin, the city of palimpsests where the past is present everywhere and nowhere? And if so, what is she doing there? Redemption time, and if so, for whom?

In the following section, I will discuss a selection of scenes in the hope of answering these questions. *Malka Germania* spans 43 minutes, and my exploration, while selective, aims to offer an attentive examination of specific elements without encompassing the entire video work.[11]

5.1. The Street Corner

Malka is shown standing on a street corner (Figure 2). Whether she is visible to her surroundings, or not, like the invisible angels *Damiel* and *Cassiel* in Wim Wenders 1987 film *Der Himmel über Berlin*, we do not know. Dressed in a hooded white robe, she watches a man wearing a kippah and a long black frock coat re-placing German street signs with Hebrew ones, reminding us of ongoing discussions on the power of street names as a decolonial and reparative practice (e.g., Rose-Redwood et al. 2010). The new names seem to be chosen carefully. Instead

FIGURE 2 Film still from Malka Germania, 2021, Yael Bartana, JMB.

of literal translations of the German "originals," which, as pointed out by many (e.g., Azaryahu 1997; Ladd 1997), are often anything *but* original, they read as *Redemption Street*, *Occupiers Street*, *Independence Street* (Ha'atzmaut), *Resurrection Street*, and so on.[12] Some of them are actual street names taken from Israeli streets, others purposefully invented by Bartana. All of them, however, are loaded with Zionist symbolism. One street crossing is renamed *Redemption Street* and *Occupation Street*, which alludes to the Messianic belief of how the Israeli settlement (of Palestine) is an act of redeeming the land. If so, what would it mean to occupy Germany? Redemption for the Heimat?

What is redemptive about the street renaming, real and imagined? What is the difference between just renaming a street, and what Bartana does? Two things are key: first, Bartana changes the language of the signs, from German to Hebrew; second, she re-names the streets according to her own conscious imagination. By doing this, she isn't simply reverting to something that once was—the signs were never in Hebrew (the language of Israel) nor in Yiddish (the language of diaspora). Through a form of "counter-topography" (Katz 2001, 2011), Bartana's work of staging performative place and street re-namings across the city imagines a territorialization of the memories that is both present and absent in Berlin's landscape. Using her pre-enactment method, she creates a radically different geography, and imagines *another landscape* in the hopes of producing it. In a reflection on the scene's origin, as detailed in the exhibition's accompanying publication, Bartana recounts a dream where her Berlin neighbourhood was transformed:

> In my dream, Prenzlauer Berg (…) was full of signs in Hebrew. All the street and shop signs had been replaced. So after this dream my first idea was to make a film where we just replaced German signs with Hebrew signs. This was the first scene I had in mind. I can't decide if this dream was a nightmare or a longing for familiarity.
>
> (Bartana as quoted in Bartana, Harten, and Lersch 2021, 190)

This nostalgia for familiarity, as imagined in *Malka Germania*, can be understood as something akin to an antithesis to the so-called *Heimatfilme* (homeland films) produced in the 1950s. These films were made for Germans "deprived" of their homeland (the *heimatlos*) to encourage a feeling of athomeness in the new, albeit reduced, Germany, depicting the German homeland as both a "movie dream and trauma" (Kaes 1992, 15). In Bartana's vision, however, this idealized nostalgia of the Heimat is replaced with a critical confrontation with the German, the Israeli, as well as her own past. There is an ambivalent desire to belong in the new-old country Bartana have made home in—Germany—the country her father had forbidden her to even visit, and for her native homeland Israel.

A sort of longing—*Heimweh* (homesickness)—without a specific local or national target: a longing of the *Heimat*, the Homeland, and a Home in a Land. A nostalgia for the muddy soil (Flusser 2002, 107)? A longing for belonging, or "longing for a home that no longer exists—or never existed?" (Legg 2004, 100).[13] Just as Meyer and Norgaard (2022, 1394) argue when discussing geographic analogies used to describe places as constellations, linked through memory-work, these Benjaminian memory constellations are at play in Malka Germania as well, in the way Bartana alludes to the Israeli occupation of Palestine through visual cues. Throughout the work, Bartana insert soldiers, who interact with the landscape: running, crawling, or lurking. As we watch what is presumably a company of soldiers from the Israeli Defence Forces emerge

FIGURE 3 Film still from Malka Germania, 2021, Yael Bartana, JMB.

from the sewers, one wonders if memory has turned into territory; is Berlin once again under occupation? If so, by whom?

5.2. Throwing Germany Out the Window

Street re-naming is not the only form of redemption glimpsed in *Malka Germania*. In contrast to acknowledgement, redemption requires a settlement, a debt to be paid for the atonement to occur. Throughout the film, further dimensions of this payment are revealed. A soldier is depicted standing in front of the Reichstag building, adorned with Tefillin—a set of prayer accessories—and blowing a Shofar, a ceremonial horn used during the holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (Figure 3). This act, traditionally symbolic of a wake-up call, signaling atonement and repentance, gains added intensity against the backdrop of the surrounding landscape. Is this an arresting of time in the Benjaminian sense? As the eerie sound echoes across the streets, the debts of the past begin to be settled—in a material-symbolic sense, at least.

In a following scene, objects symbolizing the very essence of "German" culture are thrown out of windows, itself a familiar practice in the (past) Berlin streetscape, mirroring the forced deportations and their accompanying property destruction during the Holocaust. A Christmas tree—the quintessential *Tannenbaum*—falls to the ground, its needles scattering across the street. Next, white ceramic busts of Friedrich Schiller and Ludwig van Beethoven crash against the sidewalk, while German passports slowly fall, ending up among the ceramic shards (Figure 4). In an interview, Bartana explains this as a desire to "free" the German people by urging them to "throw all the objects that belonged to Nazi grandpa and grandma out the windows" (Bartana as quoted in Littman 2021). Perhaps it is also a symbol for personal (be)longing?

FIGURE 4 Film still from Malka Germania, 2021, Yael Bartana, JMB.

Bartana's poignant inclusion of the German EU passport should be understood in relation to its use as a form of "redemptive" settlement (reluctantly) offered by the German government to survivors and descendants of the victims of the Holocaust.[14] The possibility to be "renaturalized" as a German citizen for those deprived of their nationality during the period of Nazi rule has—in theory, at least—been available since 1949, when the *Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepblik Deutschland* (Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany) was introduced.[15] However, many of those who were "denaturalized," or their descendants, were in principle excluded from gaining citizenship, due to the range of prerequisites deciding who actually had the right to be German, itself a manifest of the longevity of the state policy of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil).

Instead of a movement towards unity, or redemption, the 1949 law has been the subject of continuous amendments, induced by intense pressure and critique put forth by survivor organizations and activist groups. Commenting on the 2021 ratification of one of these amendments, the Fourth Act Amending the Nationality Act,[16] then Interior Minister Horst Seehofer noted in a statement to the press that it was not only "about putting things right, [but also] about apologizing in profound shame (…) It is a huge fortune for our country if people want to become German, despite the fact that we took everything from their ancestors" (*Deutsche Welle* 2021). While perhaps missing the point somewhat—as, after all, one wonders if *becoming German* is the motivating factor for the applicants—the amendment did remove some of the most contested prerequisites, such as those excluding children born outside marriage (Bateson 2021).

Nevertheless, one must adhere to the German nation-state's "bureaucratic insistence on ethnic divisions," a phrase used by Boym (2001, 245) to describe the Othering produced by the categories set up in EU member-states to separate those belonging to the community, and those not. And so, while Germany removed obstacles for *Jus sanguinis* for children born out of wedlock, other exclusionary measures remain, such as the requirement of basic knowledge of laws and

customs of Germany and German language—to be confirmed in an interview with a government official (Potts and Brady 2020).[17] Put differently, forced to appear in front of the "border bureaucrat" (Boym 2001, 245), as the spectacle that is the "security theatre of national borders" continues (Meyer and Norgaard 2022, 1397; see also Amoore and Hall 2010). Those who were once forced—by law—to relinquish the language, legal rights, and social customs once possessed in Germany, not only have to prove that they historically did not belong to the German race and nation (not being *Deutschblütig*), also must show evidence of most certainly belonging in the German nation, and thus worthy of "renaturalization" into the *Heimat*. As such, the possibility to become German (again) is dependent on the simultaneous corroboration of one's past lack of German blood and one's contemporary possession thereof. Like Weizman put it: "Once again, Germany defines who is a Jew" (quoted in Prochnik, Weizman, and Dische-Becker 2023). Where is the "J"-stamped passport when you need it?[18]

Continuity preserves everything, as new paradigms do not end the old, to evoke Benjamin (see Mosès 2009, 101). Or, using Mitchell's (2000, 266) words, instead of "once again forging *ein Volk*, the reality has been one of continued, if contested, difference," akin to what Meyer and Norgaard (2022, 1398) sees as a reperformance of past difference in service of territorial, and mnemonic, stasis. The never-ending struggle over the access to citizenship can be difficult to fathom, but for Felix Couchman, a lawyer representing a group advocating the abolishment of all special requirements for "renaturalization," the explanation is obvious: "The German government doesn't like being told that there is a problem and here is the solution" (Potts and Brady 2020; see also Whitehouse 2019). This reminds us of what Adorno (2005, 89) said: "In the house of the hangman one should not mention the noose; one might be suspected of harbouring resentment." Bartana seem to have no trouble mentioning the noose, of un-settling the comfortable "cotton blanket" of the fatherland (Flusser 2002, 105). The scene showing the shards of Schiller and Beethoven together with passports raining down like leaflets at the end of a war simultaneously acknowledges and dismisses the precious symbols of the nation-state which seem to be of vital importance to recognize if belonging is to be permitted. Perhaps that is redemption, acknowledging the existence of the Heimat by destroying it? If so, it could be interpreted as a visual-material accentuation of Adorno's critique of the attempted restoration of German culture after the Holocaust, in which art, music, and literature would function as antithesis to Auschwitz. A fraught pursuit of redemption through sublime credentialing, rather than the desired "proof of German classical humanism" (Huyssen 2003, 136; see also Kaes 1992, 13; Rothberg 1997). At the same time, it could also be understood as a personal longing: that of Bartana herself to assert *jus soli*—a right to the territory—through obtaining German citizenship; a passport instead of another art prize.

As the objects fall to the ground, a voice can be heard echoing in the background urging us to get ready—*Seid Bereit!* (a greeting used by the GDR-era pioneer scouts). Perhaps a nod to the other great German trauma of the 20th century? Has the time come for the rupture, for the now-time; is it time for Benjamin's notion of redemption, the possibility of "achieving what we were refused" (Mosès 2009, 109)?

5.3. Wandering Germans and a Phoenix Reborn

Malka is walking along train tracks through a forest, evoking the road taken by the so-called "coffin trains," filled with individuals on their way towards extinction. When Malka arrives at a

FIGURE 5 Film still from Malka Germania, 2021, Yael Bartana, JMB.

station named *Schönefeld* (translated to Hebrew), a group of German-looking people stand there waiting for something to arrive (Figure 5). A train? The Messiah? Redemption? The station looks old and abandoned, with weeds growing along the tracks and on the platform. The feeling one gets, in the words of Boym (2001, 194), is that "the past is stored here in its unredeemable emptiness." Or is it? No train seem to be arriving. We see Malka looking towards those awaiting their departure with tears running down her face. Next, the group of people are on the move, as Bartana turns Wandering Jews into Wandering Germans (for the history of the "Wandering Jew," see Roth 2001). The transformation materialises as a choreographed movement echoing both the camp inmates' death marches, as well as the long walk of shame Germans took in 1945, when those still left in the Eastern Territories attempted to return to what was left of the German Heimat at the end of the war, keeping their memory of territory when leaving for the eternal territory of memory. A German *Yerida*—or *Aliyah*?

> AUTHOR: While the symbolism is clear, it is still ambiguous what is actually taking place, what change is actually happening.
>
> BARTANA: Well, there is change? The Germans are leaving! They become wandering Germans instead of wandering Jews. So, there is actually a conclusion: she's [Malka] coming and they're [the Germans] leaving.
>
> AUTHOR: Are they leaving?
>
> BARTANA: Or they're coming, we don't know.
>
> (Author's interview with Bartana, Malmö, 2022-11-01)

In the great finale, sun-bathers, joggers, and swimmers enjoy a sunny day at the lakeside beach, the *Strandbad Wannsee*, when a redemption of sorts takes place. The villa that is seen on the other side of the lake is the *Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz*, the very location of where the so-called *Endlösung der Judenfrage* (the final solution of the extermination of the Jews) was decided in early 1942. Wannsee is a conscious location for the scene, and eerily fitting for Bartana's proposed version of redemption in Jewish messianic form, as a Benjaminian "utopia appearing in the very heart of the present" (Mosès 2009, 108; Benjamin 1991a, 1245).

The lakefront is turned into a symbolic intervention, relating to the Nüremberg laws passed in September 1935 which, among other things, banned Jews from public baths (Jensen 2016). The old name of the beach is replaced with a sign bearing the same name, but in Hebrew—the original name evocative enough on its own. Next, we notice something rumbling in the depths of the lake. As its flat surface breaks, a young man swimming is caught up by a phoenix reborn of sorts, the NSDAP *Parteiadler* (the Nazi party eagle) slowly emerging from the depths below. But the insignia is only the tip of a metaphorical mountain of crude history lurking in the depths. As the scene continues, the eagle is shown to be the finial of the *Volkshalle* (the people's hall), part of the *Welthautpstadt Germania* utopia (see figure 6). Column by column, one marble pillar after the other, the monumental building turns to life, as an "appearance of the unpredictable" (Mosès 2009, 108); a "Third Temple"-like structure manifesting what Woodward (2002, 130) called "the physical survival of (…) ambitions."

BARTANA: It's the subconscious [which] comes to play. Because they [the Germans] are also given something here.

AUTHOR: They're given their redemption.

FIGURE 6 Film still from Malka Germania, 2021, Yael Bartana, JMB.

BARTANA: Yeah … In what way?

AUTHOR: Because the Germans are given the *Volkshalle*.

BARTANA: Yeah.

AUTHOR: So, the building and perhaps the dream of Germany, that never happened, it's now happening.

BARTANA: Yeah! But it's always paradoxical, and also two directions.

(Author's interview with Bartana, Malmö, 2022-11-01)

The sunbathers' view of the *Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz* is exchanged for that of the *Volkshalle*. However, this also means that the beach becomes something else, as evident from the Hebrew re-naming. The view of the guilt of the past is replaced by a view of the future once promised. But what must be sacrificed to reach the past utopia? Remember the saying about travelling back in time: simply breaking a wooden stick might change the course of history. As such, instead of facing the horrors of the past (the villa), the sunbathers are stuck on the beach with their eyes staring and mouths open, to evoke Benjamin's Angel of History, facing the never-realized glory of the past rising from the depths, and their backs turned to the actualization of a *what if*. It is not a past that returns, but a past that is redeemed in the present. A new old land? Or an old new land? Is this redemption, or is it the horror fantasy of a present past/possible future realised? Nightmare or (be)longing?

6. CONCLUSION

BARTANA: I think for me what is so powerful about the work [is] that it is ambiguous, but it opens many doors for new ideas and the interpretation from the public. Basically, I've done my work and here it is, take it, do whatever you want. My hope was always that somebody would actually continue, take my legacy, take the project, and continue and create something new.

(Author's interview with Bartana, Malmö, 2022-11-01)

What does *Malka Germania* tell us about Germany's mnemonic land wars after 1945? And what does it tell us about the possibility of redemption? Huyssen (2003, 146) has argued that Germany after 1945 has mainly been concerned with "acknowledgement and recognition," rather than "redemption and resolution." That is, Germany has essentially been caught in a continuous dialectical loop between memory and forgetting, which, "always leave something unresolved and in need of further articulation" (Huyssen 2003). The nation-state thus continues down the trodden path of acknowledgement and recognition, stuck in the "gravitational pull" of trauma and the past (Huyssen 2003, 153–54), equally afraid of letting go as of taking the burden off, setting their back straight, and putting things, and landscapes, right (see Weigel 2013, 234).[19]

Behind the video screens at the exhibition in the Jewish Museum in Berlin there is a diorama featuring Malka as a bronze statue (Figure 7). Facing the window, with a view towards Daniel Libeskind's *Garden of Exile*, she holds out her hand from which she releases the *Parteiadler*. The Jews have returned, no longer "at blame" for the atrocities they faced.[20] In exchange, Germany can escape its march of shame to instead become "great again," as the *Volkshalle* is

FIGURE 7 Malka Germania. Redemption Now exhibition view, 2021, Yael Bartana. JMB, photo: Jens Ziehe.

"realized" after more than 80 years as a lingering future vision from the past. The debts have been paid, and a barter of sorts has been made. Whether this is an aspiration—a wish?—for change, a wry provocation, or a vision of the future is not made explicit in Bartana's work. Instead, what Harten (2021, 178) calls a "conflict with reality" is resolved through the conscious ambiguity inherent in Bartana's critical imagination; a perpetual discomfort. Is this the break from the gravitational pull? Are we done with the Adornean "working through the past," the unknotting of history, now that Bartana wraps up her "working through the future," making the final payment of what was owed? Is Germania redeemed, at last?

In my reading of Bartana's work, yes—this is in a way what is suggested. However, despite Herzl's words of wisdom, it is not enough to simply *wish* for something to happen if change is to come—the artwork is, after all, only the ambiguous foundation. What she does do, in contrast to wishing, is to produce a Benjaminian now-time of sorts, which, in combination with human activity can achieve redemption. As such the real work of redemption starts afterwards—the pre-enactment is only the suggestion, the re-placement is up to us. Beyond producing a counter-topography using "memory in the social present" (Huyssen 2022, 20), art should be understood as having the capacity to produce a different landscape in the present, based on the past, reclaiming territory, and redeeming memory. Thus, the collective work of scholar and artist can "contribute to more socially just futures" (Till 2008, 109) through active engagement in critical memory-work (Alderman and Inwood 2013, 245).

In this article, I have proposed an interpretation of Yael Bartana's *Malka Germania* as a radical rethinking of Berlin's memory landscapes, suggesting that her work not only reframes struggles over memory, but also materialises them as territorial struggles. *Malka Germania* can be seen as an intriguing pre-enactment of a counter-topography of terror, a term ripe with wordplay, wherein the collective memory of a Berlin before the Holocaust, encompassing both the perspectives of victims and perpetrators is allowed to unfold in a pursuit of redemption. Within this complex narrative, a Messianic figure's ominous presence simultaneously brings closure and disturbance to the historical discontent of debts unpaid. As the Holocaust landscape is reconfigured and mapped anew, critical queries emerge: whose memory is (re)territorialized, and whose redemption is reached? While numerous groups and movements have advocated for reparations and redemption in various forms for the victims of the Third Reich's violent policies, what sets Bartana's artistic intervention apart from these? In its simplest form, the answer is that Bartana proposes an alternative geography, rather than merely advocating for an alternative policy.

This approach transcends mere reinterpretation; it is a call to action, urging us to bring about real change by moving beyond symbolic representations of memory, and actively transforming both perception and the material landscape. Ultimately, it proposes using imagination to manifest a new reality. Doing so fundamentally reimagines the way we perceive and interact with the historical landscape, offering a wholly different perspective on addressing the legacy of the Holocaust.

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NOTES

1. On film geographies and cinematic landscapes, see e.g., Escher (2006); Gandy (2021); Lukinbeal (2005). For more detailed surveys of video-based art, see e.g., Kholeif (2015); Magagnoli (2015).
2. In January 2024 it was announced that Bartana would participate in the 60th Venice Biennale, this time representing Germany.
3. The Hebrew term *Aliyah* (ascent) refers to the immigration of Jews in diaspora to Israel. *Yerida* (descent) entails the opposite: the emigration of Jews from Israel (see Siegel 2011, 223).
4. Evident in her 2013 work *Inferno*, chronicling the construction of the Third Temple of Solomon in São Paulo by a Neo-Pentecostal church (Bartana 2015).
5. Bartana has conveyed that she experienced a rupture with Israel during her time studying in the US and the Netherlands, coinciding with the first and second intifadas, which led her to exploring the question of "What is the place that I grew up in?" in her art. For more on Bartana's relationship with Israel, Zionism, and Palestine, see Bartana (2008); Bartana and Cichocki (2011); Schweizer (2017).
6. It should be noted that Scholem oscillated between supporting and critiquing the idea of a Jewish nation state in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine—where he immigrated in 1923. For a longer discussion on Scholem's shifting Zionism and his relationship to Benjamin's ideas, see Raz-Krakotzkin (2013).
7. Buck-Morss here refers to an endnote at the very end of the first volume of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, which in its German original reads: "Notwendigkeit einer Theorie der Geschichte, von der aus der Faschismus gesichtet werden kann" (1991a, 1244).
8. See also Azoulay's (2019) concept "potential history," as well as Bendor, Eriksson, and Pargman's (2021) discussion on "recasting/pastcasting."
9. This relates to Adorno's critique of Germany as being in denial of their culpability, rather than actually "working through their past," arguing that their urge to break free from the past is stronger than the will to make it right. See Adorno (2005, 89–103).
10. This did not entail changing the name of the city, but rather conceptualizing and anchoring the notion of Berlin as a capital of the world in the minds of people. Note that the name *Welthauptstadt Germania* is a post-war construct, found in Albert Speer's 1969 memoir *Inside the Third Reich*. During the planning, Hitler rather used *Germania* (see e.g., Featherstone 2005; Ishida 2020).
11. In *Malka Germania,* Bartana employs a multidimensional approach to narrative, wherein scenes are not necessarily tethered to a linear chronology, nor presented accordingly.
12. The names are not translated in the artwork, but some are given in the artist book released in connection with the exhibition. The street signs visible in Figure 2 translates as "Street of Redemption" and "Street of the Occupiers/Occupation," which, according to Julia Roth, points to "the ambivalences in current Zionist politics" (2021, 177–178). My interpretation of Bartana primarily focuses on the German context, lacking a deeper insight into the Israeli perspective. Incorporating the Israeli viewpoint would be intriguing but necessitates a more profound understanding of Israeli political and cultural history, as well as proficiency in the Hebrew language. See Dotan-Dreyfus (2021) for a discussion of Bartana's work and the question of *Wiedergutmachung* from an Israeli perspective.
13. For a longer discussion on nostalgia, longing, Heimat and Heimweh, see Boym (2001, 12); Flusser (2002, 93ff).
14. See https://arolsen-archives.org/en/news/citizenship-for-victims-of-nazi-persecution on "German Citizenship for descendants of victims of Nazi persecution," accessed November 22, 2023.
15. See Art 116, Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany) on the "Definition of 'German' – Restoration of citizenship."
16. See https://www.bva.bund.de/DE/Services/Buerger/Ausweis-Dokumente-Recht/Staatsangehoerigkeit/_documents/Meldung/Meldung_Gesetzesaenderung.html, accessed November 22, 2023.

17. One of the remaining obstacles is the *jus soli* principle ('right of the territory'), regulating who must give up any foreign citizenship(s) to become a German citizen. See https://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/themen/verfassung/staatsangehoerigkeit/staatsangehoerigkeitsrecht/staatsangehoerigkeitsrecht-node.html, accessed November 22, 2023.
18. For further insight into Germany's shifting attitudes toward Jewish migration, see Brenner (2018); Brinkmann (2002).
19. This can be seen in the policing of dissenting voices (many of them Jewish) in Germany, especially so following October 7, 2023. Moreover, as Özyürek (2023, 3) highlights, Germany seems to be more focused on "distributing the foundational German guilt and inherited debt of the Holocaust to people who mostly arrived after the crime" than of dealing with its own inability of putting things right.
20. This refers to the saying "The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz," see Lustig and Leveson (2006).

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