

"Historiographic Irony": on Art, Nationality and In-Between Identities

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Abstract

The paper deals with questions of identities of native Israeli artists who chose to live out of the country, or to move back and forth to and from it. It asks about the ways these wanderings are reflected in their artwork. "Historiographic Irony" is a hybrid notion, combining criticism of historical narratives concerning the Israeli state with ironic artistic expression.

The article discusses the work of four contemporary artists who produce artworks in diverse techniques, such as video, performance and installation art. Yael Bartana, Erez Israeli and Tamir Zadok are artists who constantly deal with Israeli nationality and history in their artwork, using ironic components. In comparison, I examined the works of Mika Rottenberg, who is now a New York based artist. She is concerned with global social issues and neglected specific national identity altogether. All of them use visual irony as a means of reflecting and criticizing society.

The analysis was done in awareness of the life stories of the artists, in an attempt to trace the ways they establish their identities through their art. I pre-supposed that these identities will be shaped in the in-between space of being an Israeli citizen and a citizen of the world. I asked how ironic expression appears in their work, what kind of irony do they use and in what ways does it serve them.

The methodology combined visual analysis, interviews with the artists and analysis of secondary discourses in the media. As theoretical background I used various fields of knowledge such as literature and language studies, Sociology, and Visual Culture studies. Definitions of Irony from other fields of knowledge were adjusted to art review and analysis.

The findings point out that visual and artistic irony has many different goals in the use of historiographic fiction. It can bind an artist to his homeland and native society, or it can help to detach, or to heal the breaches in the in-between space. In comparison, when a detachment from any identification with a native origin occurs, the subjects of ironic art become cosmopolitan and a-historical.

Keywords: Irony, Identities, Visual art, Israel, Mockumentary

Introduction

In this article I would like to offer some ideas, arguments and interpretations relating to works of visual art containing elements of what I refer to as "historiographic irony". I will attempt to characterize the "historiographic irony" that is unique to the art of young Israeli artists, for whom Israeli history and culture are a source of inspiration and a formative basis for their works. Additionally, I will try to show how artists who grew up in Israel, but reside outside her borders today, employ this irony to deal with their complex identities.

My research is based on contemporary visual artworks that were created since 2001. I examined the body of works of three artists: Yael Bartana, Tamir Zadok and Erez Israeli for whom

Israeli nationalism is a clear and recognizable part of the content of their work, and how they deal with this through ironic elements. In comparison, I will discuss some examples from the works of Mika Rottenberg, an artist whose definition as "Israeli" is subject to examination, and I will ask what is different about the social and historical attitudes projected in her work.

Methodology

I chose a qualitative methodology based on socio-visual analysis: decoding and interpreting the signs and symbols that appear in the social, cultural and historical meanings of visual imagery. I did this through interpretive analysis of visual texts supported by interviews with the artists, secondary texts in the media and online,

as well as theoretical discourses that I extracted from relevant disciplines such as literature, philosophy and cultural studies.

The following analysis of artworks will develop interpretations by linking the content of ironic works with historiographical-social themes, derived from an awareness of the artists' biography and an attempt to trace the ways in which they construct their identities.

What is 'Historiographic Irony'?

"Historiography" as opposed to 'history', is a way to write and understand history in a manner that conveys one of many possible truths, and depends on the interpretive vantage point of the researcher. The term 'irony' (εἰρωνεία; Eironeia) was investigated as a concept that often appears in oral, verbal and written representations of language.¹ Lacking proper references from the arts I used the different verbal definitions of irony in order to explain visual and artistic phenomena.

Paul de Man described irony as an idea that eludes any definition; he noted that even the most renowned authors who studied it failed to fully capture its meaning (De Man, 1996, p. 163-5). Wayne Booth reached the conclusion that the spirit of irony, if depleted to the end, can destroy and dismantle any subject that touches it. Therefore, a discussion of the rhetoric of irony is necessary to avoid negativity for its own sake, while searching for a different meaning of the term in an attempt to understand its positive contribution to cultural discourse (Booth, 1974). Indeed, Margaret Rose formulated a version of irony that has a positive meaning and which contributes to the personal, human involvement of the user (Rose, 1979).

The first century Roman theorist Quintilian defined 'verbal irony' as a linguistic trope in which a person says the reverse of what he actually intended. This type of irony is largely represented by the sentence: "the stated meaning is the opposite of the implied meaning" (for example: the phrase "What a wonderful day!" when said on a day of storms and floods). In contrast to this simple structure, linguistic researchers Tobin and Israel defined irony as a phenomenon consisting of at least two viewpoints: that of the speaker and that of the

receiver. This "double audience," initially interprets the situation as simple, then immediately afterwards, connects to the speaker's ironic intention as it "zooms-out" to a higher viewpoint, which allows the extraction of an ironic meaning from what has been said. "In this interpretive process, a meaning is assessed from one viewpoint (the ironized) and then, simultaneously or a little later, re-assessed to a higher viewpoint (the ironic)" (Tobin and Israel, 2012, p. 28). 'Romantic irony', is characteristic of Schlegel's writings (1797), as "a sudden bursting of the individual out of himself and then his immediate return to skepticism and self-irony". "Romantic irony marks the poet as being, at the same time, subjective and objective, inside the work and outside of it, both creating and watching all at once" (Ofrat, 2011).

Historiographic irony, therefore, is a concept that refers to the links between the personal to the political and the historical that are created in ironic works of art. In the present study, this is analyzed through works of art that rewrite Jewish-Zionist-Israeli history in an ironic and critical manner.

Identities in the process of change

The aim of this study is to ask why irony appears as a common strategy in the works of young Israeli artists and what role this irony serves. Historical irony is revealed as an effective means of relating to a familiar historical narrative which undergoes change by turning around its social conception. That is why I formulated a number of assumptions which I would like to examine here.

The first assumption is that the source of historiographic irony is post-traumatic stress, a constant and persistent element in Israeli society, which has worsened especially among the generation who experienced the euphoria of peace between the years 1992 to 2000, and was disillusioned with the outbreak of the second intifada in 2001. The sons and daughters of this generation commenced their activities in the art world at the beginning of the decade. Trauma is shaped in their art as visual forms of sobriety, disappointment, shock, nihilism, and emotional alienation. The irony in this case serves as a distancing away from a subject and as a way to express a negative outlook in relation to the figure of irony, namely the State of Israel. I will illustrate this idea through works by Yael Bartana.

¹ Basic research in the history of the concept was done by Thomson (1926), Dyson, (1965), Muecke, (1982) and Enright (1986). Claire Colebrook's (2004) extensive book presents the structure and history of irony and postmodern practices based on it.

The second assumption is that artists refrain from expressing feelings of caring and solidarity with the Israeli-Zionist experience in response to the internal politics of the art field in which they are expected to convey more universal, complex messages in the realm of artistic inner discourse. Therefore, these artists demonstrate solidarity with what is happening in the country through the use of visual irony, because it preserves a degree of differentiation and sophistication, but nevertheless touches upon national content. I will illustrate this through the works of Tamir Zadok and Erez Israeli.

The third assumption is that the recurrent situation of emigration and return which is typical of the millennial generation leads to less stable place-attachment and cultural belonging. The multitudes of youth that wander away from the country are phenomena that can be described as an Israeli rite of passage. This can occur in the "big trip," following their release from the army, in the transition to higher education abroad, or in residency projects for artists. This may also be the result of searching for a better economic future in a globalized world and the relocation of new immigrants who leave Israel to countries that had been perceived as more financially promising - all these are phenomena which oppose the development of a world view which is committed to one place, and thus encourages ironic approaches that offer relative protection for the vulnerable, exposed core of the soul. The result of these internal and external wanderings is increased exposure to the narratives of other cultures, and the development of empathy with the constructive stories of subcultures in which the wanderers find themselves.

The last assumption deals with global space and the forms of transfer and acquisition of knowledge and information in the postmodern world. When any form of "truth" also encompasses a variety of competing truths, you cannot produce an artistic statement committed to only one point of view. The ability of irony to shift between at least two viewpoints is a useful tool for representation of relative perceptions, transience and randomness, which characterizes the view of postmodern world. This approach often leads to a complete disregard of Israeli identity and the adoption of an alternative identity as a "universal person," which ironically examines global themes that are not committed

to a place or a defined political space, as I will show through the works of Mika Rottenberg.

Socio-Visual Analysis and irony

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard argued in his well-known essay *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841), that irony is a tool that serves someone who seeks to leave himself outside the object of reference, so that the ironic criticism does not obligate him to commit to anything or take responsibility for change (Kierkegaard, 1965). This approach, which defines irony as a distancing tool from the given object and as a way to express a negative outlook in relation to it, will be considered in our discussion of works by Yael Bartana.

Contrary to this negative view of irony, the American philosopher and scholar of social thought Jonathan Lear (2003) concluded that irony is not sarcasm, which he defined as defensive, but superficial humor, and that you can gain "serious" insights from it regarding caring and inter-human involvement. Thus, Lear illustrates how in the writings of Kierkegaard, irony is used to produce the most accurate meaning which was intended by the sender, and therefore has a vital therapeutic role. Lear claims that irony means to cast doubts about any certain truth, asking fundamental questions, and exposing "obvious" and transparent beliefs. Casting doubt points to the tension between arrogant ambitions and the realization of them that underlies the establishment of societies. Hence, the deep questions asked by irony are indicative of a serious meaning rather than aimless cleverness. In any case, irony must undergo a process of restraint and conversion in order to glean a positive personal and/or social meaning. This approach is reflected in the works of Tamir Zadok, and also to some extent, in those of Erez Israeli. Both artists employ irony to create emotional distance precisely because of their caring and deep involvement in society. Questioning their foundational beliefs stems from a desire to change the *status quo* in order to improve society, and not as a statement of utter despair.

The American philosopher Richard Rorty also saw irony as a tool for personal and social change. In his important book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty paved the way for understanding of the contribution of literature and the arts to the liberation of the

individual on one hand, and to the establishment of social solidarity on the other. Rorty's philosophy is based on a stance that rejects external and metaphysical sources to the notions of truth, justice, ethics and other philosophical concepts that are seemingly absolute. For him, there is no useful distinction between values and social beliefs, and facts, and therefore human inquiry cannot be subject to any constraints except those of discourse, i.e., only the agreements which can be reached within a social framework.

About the concept of "truth," Rorty wrote that it is based on the contingent, that is, random and constant change rather than a stable, absolute or metaphysical core. When any form of "truth" also has a variety of competing truths, you cannot produce an artistic statement committed only to one point of view. The ability of irony to vacillate between at least two points of view is a useful tool for representation of relative, temporary and contingent perceptions, those which characterize the views of the postmodern world. Following Rorty, I will try to show how historiographical irony expresses the impermanence and relativism of historical truths in the networked postmodern space, in which access to information is unlimited, and for every point of view one can also find alternative ones. For example, understanding that Israeli identity is not uniform and it contains multiple sub-identities is characteristic of the hyper-connected thinking in our global world. These reasons can cause a generation of artists, who are producing works in the second decade of the millennium, to see things in a broader perspective. Distancing and estrangement from the Israeli place produces in them new insights regarding their Israeli identity as well as their world citizenship.

"Historiographic meta-fiction"

In her influential books, Canadian literary scholar Linda Hutcheon, delves deeply into the politics of irony. One of the key concepts that Hutcheon introduces is: "historiographic meta-fiction".² According to her, in postmodernism,

² An example of "historiographic- meta-fiction" is a postmodern architectural structure which ironically quotes elements that resemble Greek columns, but it is self-conscious about the impossibility of the imitation of the classical model. This awareness is made clear by the use of contemporary materials such as plastic that mimics marble, materials that reveal the fake and point to the predictable failure in an attempt to reconstruct history. The "quote" is stating a culturally reflective and ironic comment about both ancient and contemporary times.

artistic fiction and history are texts that correspond with one another, and thus gain equal status, by reprocessing the past in terms of a parody (Hutcheon, 1988: 122-123). The researcher claimed that the tools used to re-visit or 'recreate' history are different artistic expressions, such as photography, video, painting, dance, literature, music and architecture.³

Hutcheon's discussion of historiographic metafiction provides an effective theoretical framework for analyzing the works of Mika Rottenberg. The bizarre and comical fictions she creates relate to internationally recognized forms of organization of corporate work. Rottenberg 'recreates' these structures by means of parody in order to reexamine them. Her parodic videos shed light upon fundamental issues such as the exploitation of cheap labor, mistreatment of women, inadequate working conditions, marketing manipulations in the world of compulsive consumption, and more. As an artist who completely moved away from the Israeli narrative she shows a global and a-historical sensitivity that can be produced anywhere on the planet, regardless of the origin of the artist.

Tamir Zadok: Attached to the place

Tamir Zadok represents for me an artist affiliated with the Israeli place, attached to it with every fiber of his being. His criticism of Israeli culture and society stems from his careful observation that is filled with humor, but is also compassionate and loving. Although he did leave on short stays as an Artist in Residence in Turkey and Paris, his home port is in Israel, and to this day, he has never left the country for long periods. His criticism is kept within "the family" and his works make use of irony to avoid sentimentality, while their sensitivity is nourished by solidarity with the human and socio-political space in Israel.

In *Gaza Canal* (2010)⁴ Zadok created a video-collage mockumentary⁵ that tells the story of the emergence of an imagined island that was

³ Hutcheon, Linda, 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London: Routledge.

Hutcheon, Linda, 1994. *Irony's Edge: the theory and politics of irony*, London: Routledge.

Hutcheon, Linda, 2000. *A theory of parody: the teachings of twentieth-century art forms*, Urbana: Illinois UP.

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/12130736>

⁵ A mockumentary is a type of film or television show in which fictional events are presented in documentary style to create a parody.

isolated from the "Gaza strip" by a canal - created through the help of international donations and Israeli entrepreneurship. The alleged island becomes a thriving tourist site and a symbol of international peace. Art critic Galia Yahav wrote about this work that the sarcasm in it is sharpened in every frame, in the soundtrack, in the structure and in the deepest inner meanings. "These are a pungent nine minutes, witty to the point of being venomous, rife with pastiches and parodies about a 'securitism' loaded with money, about apolitical sweet talk [...] of lying to the people, of synthesizing a normalized history, cleansed of all elements of the phlebotomized bloody conflict" (Yahav, 2010).

In this work, Zadok tried to decode the artificial production process of a national historiographical image. He traced the aesthetics and rhetoric of a well-known genre of short "recruited" propaganda films in order to turn their meaning upside down. Zadok describes the intention behind his art: "In this work, humor becomes a means of coping with a difficult reality. It exposes the laundering of words and actions in a way that you are unable to distinguish between real and fiction. Using the same rhetoric tools creates ethical contemplation: Is it possible to create an alternate reality, even if no moral or ethical question is being asked? I indulge in this option; it is a tool that I feel comfortable with" (Zadok, interview, Tel Aviv 2015).

The irony in this work is apparent through the use of visual language, editing and soundtrack which are stylized in the same manner that appear in the "audiovisual shows" genre, which is common at "visitors' centers". These audiovisual spectacles form an intersection between leisure tourism and mass education through a well-laundered narrative. They make use of historical records, photographs and documents possessing a semblance of authenticity and historical accuracy. But their use is manipulative and the ironic observer is expected to be aware of the relativity of the historiographical "truth" which is aggressively marketed to him.

Despite the irony and scathing social awareness of this video, it does have optimistic tones and it inspires hope for the realization of this utopian dream in a future alternative reality. This work, which went viral on the internet during the war known in Israel as "Operation

Protective Edge" (Gaza strip, 2014), is actually comforting in its practical proposal for a better future in the Middle East region.

The conclusions drawn by Rose (1979) and Lear (2003) that "serious" insights can be generated by irony in terms of caring and personal and human involvement are compatible with Zadok's proclamation that "in terms of tactics there is a difference between irony and cynicism, which I perceive as a lack of compassion. In my works, there is always a love of human beings. I do not gloat over the misery of others, but act out of compassion. My position is not cynical, rather, it stems from a place of deep caring"(Ibid.).

In his solo exhibition held at the Rosenfeld Gallery in Tel Aviv in 2014 (*Forefathers*), less ironic works were already on display. "At some point, I got tired of being funny," Zadok stated in our interview. Referring to his work: *Jewish Wedding in Morocco* made following Eugène Delacroix's famous painting by the same name (1841), he said that what interested him was the cultural disappearance of Jewish life in Morocco; the cultural eradication of the Moroccan, or Diaspora Jew, which was the result of their immigration to Israel. This work found its way to the viewers' hearts and was sold in several copies. The artist concluded that by shedding his ironic perspective, this actually allowed more people to connect with and enjoy the work, and that this new phase of his artistic development represents "a kind of maturity" (Ibid.). Zadok's involvement with the historiography of the state of Israel is fed, then, from his personal experiences, and relates to the country out of a sense of belonging, solidarity and a desire to change it for the better.

Yael Bartana: Double Identity

Yael Bartana's career took off at the beginning of the 21st century as result of a series of video works that critically examined the "tribal" texts of Israeli identity affected by militarism and aggression. On her website, she describes the nature of her work as dealing with the "politics of memory" (yaelbartana.com). Her starting point was a critical approach to public ceremonies and "social distractions," as she defined them, which nourish the Israeli national identity and aim to endorse the collective identity of the Jewish State on the basis of a repetitive ritual. For example, in her work *Trembling Time* (2001), she explored the

standstill of all cars during the minute of silence on Memorial Day, photographed from a bridge overlooking the Ayalon Highway, in the midst of Tel Aviv. In this video, the artist touches upon the Holy of Holies of Israeli identity, in a documentary gaze which is apparently indifferent, yet it awakens thoughts about identity, collectivism, cultural obedience and mobilizing masses through sweeping convictions in the necessity of constant sacrifice, for the sake of the continuity of Jewish survival in the national context. Her gaze in this early work is neither ironic nor critical. Instead, it can be described as detached, not engaged in any way other than as a spectator, and certainly not sentimental.

Between the years 2006-2011, Bartana lived and worked in Poland. In 2011, in the 54th Venice Biennale, a well-known international mega art exhibition, the artist presented her art project at the Polish Pavilion, as the only Polish representative that year, a decision that provoked both discomfort and much embarrassment to Israel. Nowadays she divides her time between Tel Aviv and Amsterdam, but the Israeli art scene considers her as one of its most important and brilliant representatives and her work is regularly displayed in major museums and galleries in Israel. Bartana's double identity is expressed in works created since she moved to Europe, as opposed to her earlier work that focused mainly on Israeli reality.

Yael Bartana's "Polish trilogy" entitled *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, is a monumental video creation, superbly staged, filmed and edited in three-parts, that engages in the imaginary activities of a Jewish renaissance movement, calling for the return of 3.3 million Jews back to Poland – the number of Jews that resided there before World War II. In this work Bartana tightens her use of the expressive tool of the propaganda-documentary film genre, in the spirit of Soviet Socialist Realism, in order to mold an ironic statement about the ethos of the pre-State tradition of Jewish settlement known as "Wall and Tower". Bartana stated in an interview that the purpose of the work was to "challenge the status quo both in Israel and in Poland, to see which ghosts and demons emerge, and understand what it says about Israel and Europe" (Yael Bartana, *Reshef*, 2012).

The first chapter of the Polish trilogy is *Mary Koszmary* or *Nightmares*, shot in 2007. Bartana defined the goals of the video as an

"examination of complex systems of political and social relations between Jews, Poles and other nationalities in the age of globalization" (yaelbartana.com). A young Polish activist delivers a speech in the Polish National Stadium in Warsaw in front of a huge arena of empty stone benches. A circular view of the camera reveals the absence of the imaginary audience and the abandoned and neglected space. The sound echoing the voice of the speaker emphasizes the emptiness. The camera jumps in quick cuts between extreme close-ups on the speaker's face and the empty space. The cinematic void is parallel to the lack implied in the text of the speech – raising the viewers' awareness of the three million missing Polish Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. The speaker's fiery speech, which is reminiscent of popular melodramatic Nazi rallies, uses the structure of Nazi propaganda films in order to press on sensitive spots of Israeli national identity as well as those of the Polish. Israeli art historian Gideon Ofrat noted that *Nightmares* is a striking instance of the use of irony in Israeli art. "It goes without saying: no man in Poland ever made this kind of call, and also the artist – post-Zionist as she is – doesn't advocate for a "Jewish return to Poland". Yael Bartana is an impostor, and irony is the intellectual and creative tool she uses in her deception" (Ofrat, 2011).

The video appeals equally, but differently, to the Israeli and Polish experience. This film evokes the Polish longing for Poland's cultural boom days when a prosperous Jewish community thrived there, but it also reflects anti-Semitic anxieties about the return of Jews to Poland and their claim to property that was stolen during the Holocaust. The speaker's direct call for a Jewish return to Poland confronts the Polish viewer with his/her humanistic-globalist pretensions that have characterized Europe in recent decades. On the other hand, the Israeli-Zionist viewer grapples with the question of returning to the Diaspora, a threatening and disturbing issue that was discussed during the sobering period after the second intifada which caused many Israeli youths to seek their futures elsewhere. Yael Bartana's ironic videos and her suggested "return to Europe" are saturated with deep disappointment and despair over the Zionist dream, originating from trauma and disillusion of the peace dream of the 1990's.

On a personal level, it appears that for Bartana, who then took her first steps as a

European, this video amplifies personal questions about immigration, belonging and identity, that without the mediation of irony, are probably difficult to confront and to process. Irony, which serves as a "distancing device from the object of reference" in the words of Kierkegaard, helps her to disengage from her Israeli national identity and find an alternative in the form of a national Polish-European identity.

In the second chapter of the trilogy, *Wall and Tower* (2009), a scene depicting the construction of a Wall and Tower settlement takes place in the heart of Warsaw, using all the familiar cinematic clichés that viewers have seen before in Israel propaganda Zionist films, depicting the rise and construction of Wall and Tower communities. In this work, in which the pathos reaches its climax, Israeli actors appear alongside Polish ones. The camera caresses the young, innocent faces which are full of ideological vision, as dramatic, festive and uplifting choral music plays in the background, following the conventions of the genre. She deliberately produces congestion and excess of cinematic means to the level where irony is distinct. Comparison between this mockumentary film and an original documentation of the time indicates highlighting the individual - artificial - heroic perspective versus the naive collective spirit of the original film.

This creation, which consolidates into one the artificial and invented Polish-Jewish identity, is designed in great detail using common fictional icons like the symbol the young pioneers are wearing on their chests and sleeves, comprised of the top half as the Star of David and the lower half the Polish Eagle, as they build the settlement of Warsaw.

The rhetoric irony described by Quintilian which produces a statement encompassing the opposite meaning, reaches its enhanced and staged climax in this chapter. The impersonation, in the words of Gideon Ofrat, responds to suggestions for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, echoing the international discourse, such as the return of the Jews to Europe, their "true homeland", according to some narratives, and stirs contemplation about the possible consequences of this return.

The concluding chapter in this piece, *Assassination* (2011), involves members of the JRIMP: the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland - a movement that was invented and

established by Bartana. In this video, the members of the group mourn over the assassination of their leader; their ceremony resembles the structural pattern of Memorial Day rallies in Israel, and is also similar to ceremonies that take place during the visits of Israeli youth delegations to Poland, commemorating the Holocaust. The reference to Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin's murder, which appears in the final chapter of the trilogy, exploits the most traumatic event of the Israeli tribal fire by turning it into an idealized text, saturated with universal messages of Western and European Enlightenment, acceptance of "the other" and humanistic openness. The slogan accompanying the ceremony: "We shall be strong in our weakness" - represents in a nutshell all the psycho-social ideas of Jewish-Zionist nationalism.

Throughout the trilogy, Bartana appeals to Israeli viewers directly while bypassing the Poles and Europeans, communicating with them through schemes, ceremonial patterns and formal rituals known only to them. The construction of wall and tower settlements, youth delegations to Poland and the assassination of Rabin are cultural events that their historiographic irony can only be fully understood by Israelis.

Bartana's dialogue with her cultural origin does not cease, then, in all of her work. Rather, it becomes more complex and refined over the years. The irony she employs runs through a transformation and becomes more subtle alongside her emergence and development as an artist and as a person. This facilitates the transitional phase from defiance to acceptance, and from there she moves to contain her own "otherness" as an immigrant, a woman and an artist.

Erez Israeli: The Wandering Jew

In the beginning of the new millennium, the artist Erez Israeli became identified with the Israeli ethos and the fundamental myths of masculinity, military, bereavement, commemoration of the fallen, and national historical memory. The subjects that he dealt with back then were the relations between the individual who is drafted into society, and the arbitrariness of this society's demands for sacrifice. Deliberately, and often defiantly, Israeli questioned the mechanism of glorification of the soldier's symbolic body and projected it on his

own body, in order to disrupt and dismantle the founding symbols by means of ironic-tragic redundancy.

His work *Sewing* made in 2004, shocked sensitive viewers with a frontal picture of sticking a needle and thread back and forth into his chest, meant to sew a round memorial wreath of red gerbera daisies into his skin (a symbol of grief over fallen soldiers in Israeli tradition), only to rip it off in front of the camera's eye afterwards. Since then, the act of suturing the body has become a recurrent motif in his work. Similar to Yael Bartana at the beginning of her career, the artist brought to consciousness the inherent theatricality of memory and commemoration ceremonies. Also like her, Israeli chose to touch upon the Holy of Holies of the local culture, to stimulate critical thinking and awareness of what seemed a natural part of every Israeli citizen's life. However, in contrast to the distant gaze of Bartana, Israeli is entirely involved in the ceremony, even to the point of sewing memorial flowers onto his own skin.

Irony is not absent from Israeli's works of this period, but it is "romantic irony", which sanctifies the world of the individual subject. The individual is both the object of irony and the ironic critic. The first decades of Israeli culture hallowed emotional restraint, roughness and a preference for commitment to the collective. Erez Israeli, on the other hand, is all about sentimentality and emotionality of the individual. Irony is used here as a mediating tool in the gap between these collective and restrictive attitudes and the flux of sentiments and abundance of emotions of the individual artist as a man and as a former soldier. Here it is helpful to turn to Schlegel's definition (1797) of romantic irony: "a sudden bursting of the individual out of himself and then his immediate return to skepticism and self-irony". Even though Israeli's works are focused on his own private world - they range from self-pity as a tragic figure and a sobering, ironic vision of himself - they are set against the background of the culture in which he lives. He exposes his collaboration with militaristic and security ethos, while subverting his own social construction as a soldier, one that caused him great personal suffering. It appears, then, that his way of dealing with that suffering is by using emotional congestion on one hand, and irony on the other.

In 2009, Israeli embarked upon an exhaustive search for his Israeli-Jewish roots of

anxiety, and from there, it was a short path to the "immediate suspect"- the shadow of the Holocaust which hovers over any private or political activity in Israel. The exhibition *Friday Night* (2010) that was shown at the Givon Gallery in Tel Aviv marked a turning point in his work. In the gallery space, the video work *Jewish Lesson* (2009) was screened, which features Israeli making a yellow badge in the style of a television host demonstrating a handicraft, and then sewing it onto his body. The video is staged and edited in the style of the 20s silent films. The images in the film are cut rapidly while the background music is a swinging melody played by a "Big Band" - a sweet sound that matches the spirit of the times and enhances the ironic gap between form and content. The cinematic and musical contexts call to mind the powder keg of Europe between the two wars, in which a pluralistic, decadent, pro-Jewish and pro-gay atmosphere prevailed, while the seeds of destruction of these two populations had already been sown. The alienation created between the means of audiovisual expression and the historical baggage of the yellow star intensifies the irony and reflects the artist's doubts about the possibility of an Israeli-Jewish identity that you can sew in "a few simple lessons" according to a "do it yourself" technique. Here, Israeli raises again the debate over national identity, but this time, a struggle between Zionist-Israeli identity and Jewish Diasporic identity is added.

In recent years this shift in identification was expressed in the artist's relocation and work in Berlin. His perception of himself as a victim of the society in which he lives shifted from the victimization of a man-soldier in Israeli society to "otherness" as a foreigner, Jew, homosexual, an Israeli and an artist living in German society. Each of these identities is in conflict with hegemonic currents of European-German "purity". Life in Berlin stirred in him the need to look at German society and history and examine its anti-Semitic and racist stereotypes. His multi-dimensional foreignness has had an impact on the content of Israeli's works and influenced the nature of irony he expresses.

Untitled (Mensch und Sonne - Man and Sun), 2013, is comprised of a series of six photographs from the Nazi propaganda book by Hans Surén written in 1936, that was a bestseller in its time and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. The book calls to the "Aryan" race to venture out into nature and expose their remarkable toned

bodies to the sun and to the world. It is written like a manual and demonstrates, sometimes with photos of Surén himself, how to maintain the integrity of the Aryan body by exercising outdoors. Israeli inserted into the pages of the book a photomontage depicting his own body, mimicking the exact poses of the photographed German model. This strategy of inserting a contemporary image into an archival object in a pseudo-historical manner produces a semblance of historical truth in order to raise skeptical questions about authenticity, impersonation, imitation and manipulative historical narrative.

In this series, the artist continues to explore issues loaded with historical baggage using his personal bodily experiences. When he appropriates the German physique as if to say: "I am just like you" or "I look like you", he defies the stereotypical belief that a Jew cannot have a sturdy and muscular body. By means of the ironic comparison between his Jewish body and the German man's body in the book, Israeli grapples with anti-Semitic dogma of the weak and frail Jew, and turns it upside down. At the same time, he confronts his own origin society by raising the Israeli-Zionist view of manhood based upon models of "Aryan" masculinity. In this work, then, irony is a means of coping with Jewish tragic history from a more self-assured and amused perspective.

These days Israeli shuttles back and forth between Tel Aviv and Berlin and continues to display his work in museums and galleries in Israel, while at the same time, he is developing a career in Europe. The identity that emerges from his work in recent years is that of the Wandering Jew, not necessarily attached to one country or another, but definitely anchored in Jewish culture and tradition. At the same time, he cannot or does not want to sever ties with his Israeli habitat in which he was born and raised. The center of reference in his work has been transferred from Israeli identity to Judaism, but Zionism's founding ideas still permeate it, either consciously or unconsciously. The physical identification with the German body and the connection between masculinity, physicality and the Holocaust appear as a "diluted vaccine" with which Israeli seems to inject himself so that he can be accepted, or integrate into German society and accept himself as such. The irony he employs allows him to keep his distance and a lack of solidarity with the German historical narrative, while it also enables him to get closer

to his own personal identity story comprised of all his identities.

Mika Rottenberg: Global Identity

Mika Rottenberg's biography encompasses three continents and three national identities. When she was eleven years old, her parents immigrated to Israel from Argentina. She was raised, educated and matured in Israel until the beginning of the third decade of her life. At the start of the millennium, she moved to New York, where she completed a BA and a MA in Art and began to immerse herself in the New York art scene. Almost overnight, she was accepted as one of the brightest and most celebrated representatives of American art, and ever since that time, she lives, creates and exhibits her work in the state of New York.

Rottenberg represents a universal identity without a defined national identity; the topics with which she is concerned are global, feminist and anti-corporate. Her criticism of the exploitation of women is expressed in the work she exhibited at the Venice Biennale (2015) entitled *NoNoseKnows*. According to Rottenberg, the exploitation of women across the globe is a sophisticated apparatus to which women succumb for many different reasons, but they are always shown in her works as confined within a rigid structure activating them in an artificial and patterned way. In a video interview in 2014, while she was preparing a new work for the Biennale Art Museum in Taipei, Taiwan, the artist stated: "In my work I combine spaces together, thinking about the whole globe as a single place... the results of cause and effect - one thing happens on one side of the world and I don't know how that affects things on the other side of the world. I'm trying to create a kind of visual connection between things."⁶

In a filmed interview conducted by the art website *Art21*, she explains in detail her fields of interests to viewers. She deals with images and representations of American consumer society, and commercials for unnecessary consumer products. "I'm in love with infomercials. As an artist, the way they talk about objects is fascinating to me," she said in the same interview.⁷ The language she uses to describe her works, alongside with the subjects that

⁶ Ian Cheng 2014. Interview: "TB2014_Mika Rottenberg", *Taipei Fine Arts Museum* (online).

⁷ Miller, Wesley and Ravich, Nick, 2013. "Mika Rottenberg and the Amazing Invention Factory", *art21.org* (online)

interest her are bluntly detached from any Israeli reference. She is a-historical in the context of our discussion, even though she is completely ironic and political.

In the context of our discussion on nationalism, Rottenberg represents a "control group" of Israeli artists who completely abandoned the Israeli national-historical narrative, and prefer to correspond with global themes. In some of her biographies that appear on websites which represent her, Rottenberg's affiliation with Israel is omitted from her CV. In interviews, she presents herself as an artist based in New York, but her work is displayed in museums and prominent art sites throughout the world. She has no desire to be represented by a gallery in Israel, and her target audience is American and international.

Despite all this, the Israeli art scene refers to Rottenberg as "one of us". From 2013-2015, her work was exhibited in the Israeli art collection of the Tel Aviv Museum, and occasionally, she is displayed in other prestigious showrooms in Israel. A comprehensive assembly of her video works was also exhibited at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 2013 (*Squeeze*).⁸

Rottenberg's Jewish-Israeli identity as an artist is, therefore, not easy to detect. For me, it is possible to identify her as Israeli only in the deep structure of her artistic language, for example: questioning and skeptical thinking, sarcastic irony and higher critical thinking, human solidarity and compassion – characteristic of all the works I explored.

The contingency of truth, which Rorty pointed out, is seen here as representing the viewpoint of those who are unable to see the existence of truth or another reality except for the one inside which they are trapped. In this respect, Rottenberg is a "liberal ironist", as Rorty defines it, someone who demonstrates simple human solidarity with any person who is oppressed and trapped, no matter his or hers national or cultural origin. Rottenberg's "cosmopolitan irony", therefore, occurs when the artist does not identify with a specific historical narrative, culture or place, but expresses an identity of a "universal person".

Conclusions

It seems, then, that historiographical irony has diverse and sometimes contradictory goals. At times, it allows attachment and connection to a specific place out of social involvement, human solidarity, compassion and a desire for positive change (Zadok). From another angle, irony is a critical examination of historical and political themes in the original cultural context that allows touching the national in order to detach from it and engage in international discourse (Bartana). In the case of wandering back and forth between two cultures, irony mediates the changing identity and serves both for remote or critical observation and also for attachment – to the original society as well as the host culture (Israeli, Bartana). Sometimes, the reference to the source is deleted completely and only the universal, transnational and international reference remains. In this case, irony is contingent and aware of the relativity of perspective; it is also liberal and promotes solidarity with every human being as such (Rottenberg).

It is evident that in the reality of the second decade of the millennium, artists who grew up in Israel no longer see themselves as obligated to set down their roots in the physical place, or identify with the dominant narratives of Jewish-Israeli culture. For various reasons they travel the world and adopt secondary or intermediate identities, which encompass Israeli identity along with other national identities. Nonetheless, the interest in Israel as a source of reference has not expired, and artists express it in different ways. Even when they bother to deny or ignore their ancestral origins, the structural depth that is characteristic of Israeli culture still seeps into their works. These elements are difficult to define and formulate, but it is easy for Israelis to feel them. As a 'rule of thumb' it can perhaps be said that they are comprised of a mixture of playfulness and daring, sober-minded world-view, acute critical thinking, self-deprecating humor, human solidarity and compassion.

⁸ The exhibition site, *Squeeze*, Mika Rottenberg, a solo exhibition, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (online).

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