

LOST FUTURES AND THE CULTURE OF DEMENTIA

THE STORY OF A 'BETTER PAST', OR FROM 'WHAT IS TO BE DONE?' TO 'WHAT HAPPENED?'

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The start of the new development...
First steps...
Peace prosperity and better life...
Great tasks ahead of us...
Looking through the gap to the development
to come...
People working hard...
We are preparing for the future...
We are breaking ground for the future...
We are breaking ground for economic growth
and stability in the future...
We are in an era of great opportunity and
great challenges...¹

In his *Ornament and Crime*, 1908, the architect Adolf Loos, one of the fathers of modern architecture theory, claimed that the suffocating nature of an Art Nouveau room "taxed the owner's brain" because it lacked any space for "future living and striving, developing and desiring".² Twelve years later, Viennese journalist Karl Kraus referred to this as a lack of "running-room" or "*Spielraum*". If these remarks are considered with regard to the way early modernism was 'purged' of

the ornamentation of nineteenth-century Academicism,³ along with the gentleman-bourgeois culture that was at the same time its expressive and reproductive form,⁴ it could be said that Jasmina Cibic tells the story of the political and aesthetic regime of the twentieth-century national / social welfare state.

Understanding the precise meaning of the term *Spielraum* is a complex affair—translated as 'game room', 'manoeuvring room', even 'running room', colloquially 'wiggle room', or figuratively 'room to move', in psychoanalysis the term is used to mean 'play space' and to expand the examination of the term *Nachträglichkeit* (French *après-coup*, English *afterwardsness*), as developed by Sigmund Freud and reintroduced by Jacques Lacan.⁵ As observed by Matthias Kettner, Freud proposed a dual use of the term—as "retroactive attribution of meaning" in the process of memory alteration, and as a 'causal' component ("like a chain of effects on a series of billiard balls")⁶—an observation that led to Kettner's proposal that "psychoanalysis

¹ These and other similar 'generic' sentences appearing throughout this text are given here in the form of poetic commentary. The statements are part of Jasmina Cibic's *Spielraum* project, a video trilogy presented as a spatial-performative installation; the sentences above are from its first part, entitled *The Nation Loves It*.

² Foster, Hal, *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)*, London and New York: Verso, 2002, p 15.

³ "Adolf Loos and I, he literally, I linguistically, have done nothing more than to show that there is a difference between an urn and a chamber-pot and that it is only in this difference that culture begins to have any scope to develop. The others, however, all positive men, can be divided into those who use the urn as a chamber-pot and those who use the chamber-pot as an urn." Karl Kraus, quoted in Carr, Gilbert J, "The 'Habsburg Myth', Ornament and Metaphor: Adolf Loos, Karl Kraus and Robert Musil", *Austrian Studies*, vol 15, *Austrian Satire and Other Essays*, 2007, p 65.

⁴ "Theodor W Adorno saw no mere vague cultural historical analogy but a direct symbiosis between Loos and Kraus. The aphorism may appear simplistic, if not a parody of Loos' aesthetic theory. Yet, metonymically, 'urn versus chamber-pot' encodes both Loos' paradigmatic distinctions between (hitherto stigmatized) use value and (redundant) ornament, and the neglect of analogous distinctions, which concerned Kraus—in *Die Fackel (The Torch)* he often linked the two extremes, of philistinism and aesthetic snobbery." Carr, "The 'Habsburg Myth'", 2007, pp 65–66.

⁵ Jean Laplanche, Kurt Eissler, John S Kafka and many others agreed that the concept was best described by Matthias Kettner as *Spielraum*. This added to the previous and somewhat straightforward understanding of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* as a process and effect of 'deferred action', that is, as 'belated understanding' of traumatic events retrospectively and according to later experiences.

⁶ John S Kafka on the work of Matthias Kettner in "Time: The Uncertainty of Frame or Content", *Time and Uncertainty*, Paul Harris and Michael Crawford eds, Leiden: BRILL, 2004.

operates in *Spielraum*", that is, precisely in the space between these two meanings.⁷ What is important for our story is that, with certain provisions, *Spielraum* as 'play space' is always already fantastically recreated and able to rematerialise its very source as *something new*.⁸

Jasmina Cibic's *Spielraum* recreates the principle, or rather the very space of *Spielraum*, almost verbatim, structuring it as the 'architectonic composition' of visual verbal quotations. The fragments of historically loaded statements and pictorial signs are used as building blocks for the (re) construction of the collaged and disrupted narrative, evoking the aesthetic and social investments, the grand promises and firm beliefs of twentieth-century modernity. The sentences in the script, revolving around the social meaning of architecture, predominantly (re)presented as official and highly symbolic architectonic structures, are re-performed in the '*Spielraum* manner', that is, without the constraints of losing their material ties with 'reality' or falling into the abyss of play itself. As the artist herself describes the *Spielraum* scene: "the architecture appears as a theatre of voices".

*Soon the place we are standing in now will be
a building site full of excavators and cranes...
The laying of the corner stone is an act
of faith...
A demonstration of our conviction...
Unshakable faith...
The largest building programme that we've
had in our city...*

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Kettner, Matthias, "Das Konzept der Nachträglichkeit in Freuds Erinnerungstheorie", *Psyche*, vol 4, issue 53, January 1999, pp 309–342.

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By understanding *Spielraum* as "a play space that is fantastically recreated and able to rematerialise its very cause as something

In Cibic's work, the very symbol of building (architecture) evokes the modernist impetus of building a *better society*, that which used to be the social projection of a *better future*. And it is here that the story of modernism and of modernity must always begin—in the future.

*Our building once completed will be
a personification of our values...
An outward symbol of our resistance,
our persistence...
And our consistency in the task of
reconstructing this country...
The structure we build here will be a road
sign pointing to the future...*

Cibic's artistic thought can be connected to two contemporary discourses revolving around the notions of time and history. One of them explores the conceptual and ideological construction(s) of the actual and historical future(s), while the other engages with the culture (and politics) of memory.

*We are preparing for the future...
Our nation will endure...
Our prosperity and peace will also endure...*

The idea of the future in the twentieth century was entwined with a kind of utopian imagination that had *real* political and social consequences. Political action was unconditionally framed by a faith in the progressive future. As Franco 'Bifo' Berardi notes, all twentieth-century movements, from liberalism to social democracy, from communism to anarchism, shared the same certainty that "notwithstanding the darkness

new", but only as long as "a mutual game between the temporal content and its temporal frame" is not being challenged (Kafka, "Time", p 82). I argue that Cibic's work manages to do both—to challenge and not challenge the said relations, so that it precisely recreates the principle, or rather the very space of *Spielraum* as described above.

of the present, the future will be bright".⁹ The Hegelian-Marxist mythology of *Aufhebung*,¹⁰ formative in establishing the new totality of communism, and the bourgeois mythology of the linear (today, exponential) growth of wealth in capitalism, are both connected with technocratic mythology and the omnipresent power of scientific knowledge, that is, with the belief—frequently expressed as unavoidable certainty—in the so-called *better future*.¹¹

Today, however, this feels like a promise that never materialised, like a deferred future-to-be encapsulated within the material culture of its monumental architectonic 'witnesses', seemingly without any subsequent social function. Together with Bifo, we can see the punk movement's cry of "No Future!" some four decades ago as a self-fulfilling prophecy that soon swept over the globe. The only new utopia that appeared during the last decade of the 'century that believed in the future'—at one point overturned and replaced by its dystopian twin—was cyberculture, which has given way to the imagination of the hyper-connected and infinitely powerful 'global' mind. Yet now it seems that the utopian flavour of the network is losing ground very fast.

In *The Nation Loves It*, Jasmina Cibic confronts the viewer with disorienting

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Berardi, Franco 'Bifo', *After the Future*, Oakland: AK Press, 2011.

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The complexity of what may happen in the 'play space' of *Spielraum* may correspond with the occurrence of *Aufhebung*. As Dylan Evans writes, "Thus in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel shows how consciousness progresses towards absolute knowledge by means of a series of confrontations between opposing elements. Each confrontation is resolved by an operation called the *Aufhebung* (usually translated as 'sublation') in which a new idea (the synthesis) is born from the opposition between thesis and antithesis; the synthesis simultaneously annuls, preserves and raises this opposition to a higher level." Evans, Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, p 43. Importantly, the whole thus achieved should be viewed as "an overcoming which preserves what it overcomes".

fragmentation, the fading of the very idea of the future, together with the ideas of historical progress and social development. Placed within an environment comprised entirely of reconfigured visual elements of the modernist state spectacle, the female figure vocalises the fragmented and amalgamated text.¹² This archive of historical promises repeats the words of various public figures, scripted from a myriad of political speeches. Her (self-)questioning rehearsal brings to the fore both the affirmation and the doubt in the words she speaks:

*This rehearsal for whom? For which big
event? Towards which historical horizon?*

There is no addressee of the speech that she so persistently tries to both internalise and perform with genuine persuasion, mobilising the official, calm and 'professional' body rhetoric. But her words return to her like an echo—the more she practises, the less she seems to believe in the text she utters. Her voice becomes technicised and automatised, and we are no longer sure if these alienated and fragmented sentences represent the record of her / the collective memory, or her / the collective oblivion. As with restoring a broken tape, some words are preserved and some drown in the noise. She gradually

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"The rise of the myth of the future is rooted in modern capitalism, in the experience of expansion of the economy and knowledge. The idea that the future will be better than the present is not a natural idea, but the imaginary effect of the peculiarity of the bourgeois production model [...] ... the peculiarity of capitalist economy resides exactly in the accumulation of the surplus value that results in the constant enhancement of the spheres of material goods and knowledge... [in which the concept of progress functions as] the ideological translation of the reality of economic growth. Political action was reframed in light of this faith in a progressive future." Berardi, *After the Future*, p 18.

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In this particular case, the elements of the interior design of the monumental Palace of Federation built in 1950s in Belgrade—the former parliament of the socialist Yugoslav state that violently fell apart together with its own idea of future.

loses the position of the protagonist, as a distinctive speaker on the designed (and designated) stage, and becomes reduced to a mere ornament divorced from any ideology or meaning, a distorted voice floating over the aesthetic landscape of beautiful shapes and colours. The vocaliser of 'the archive' crashes down under the weight of words, under the task of an unperformable script.

"What comes after the end of history?" asks Boris Buden in his recent text examining the rise of extreme right-wing sentiments in Europe,¹³ referring, perhaps, not to the first-time occurrence of the event, but rather to the end of the cycle, making us wonder: Has it happened before? How many times? And how could we ever know?

Buden finds the diagnosis for the present state of affairs in the writings of the French historian Pierre Nora, who writes that "memory" has taken on a meaning so broad and all-inclusive that it tends to be used purely and simply as a 'substitute' for history".¹⁴ Today, however, a different understanding of the same words—which becomes a kind of norm—leads to confusion; if 'memory' today refers only to what we once recognised as 'data', where does that leave the notion of 'history' as the analytical, interpretative discipline of memory, the collective narrative which interconnects individual recollections?

It seems that ever since the mere storage capacity of digital devices in our bags and pockets clearly exceeded the amount of words,

images and sounds we could ever consume in our biological lifetime, a decision was arrived at, the result of obsessive memorising and historicising. 'History' became a single diverse (frequently perceived as random), utterly incomprehensible volume of different data, which could always be accessed to check a date or a name, but could never produce any meaning. It is precisely in 'memories' that follow the data, in recollecting 'the facts' that may or may not support the 'totality of the narrative' of a certain story, that any understanding is to be found.

The last two decades have seen a shift in both artistic research and practice, towards an emphasis on contemporary supremacy of memory over history.

The time in which there were *collective history* and *individual memories*, a time in which the historian alone was supposed to deliver the truth of the past, is over.... It is the memory now that has acquired collective meaning,

Buden writes.¹⁵ And this need to (re) remember, to recollect, to witness new micro-truths, has created a culture of passionate, almost fetishistic memorialism in the abandoned parliament of history. It stands as normal and true that today everyone has an equal right to express her own memory, her own tormenting or enjoyment *by* and *of* the past; to establish her own way of the musealisation of historical social consciousness, with a crucial twist in the form of 'historical truth'. Perhaps the problem

of collective memory, as the problem of what was formerly known as history, lies precisely in contemporary fetishisation of personal *experience* not as the ultimate, but as the *only* category of memory; for "memory is seen as the retrospective per se, since it does not commence before the experience it recollects is concluded".¹⁶ This seemingly simple entanglement of the notions of history and memory (specifically understood as an *experience*) also underlies the contemporary sentiment of forgetting, which is driven precisely by obsessive memorising and historicising. Jasmina Cibic's *Spielraum* can be seen as a meta-narration of this phenomenon, showing that the *culture of memory* is equal to the not-yet-proclaimed *culture of dementia*.

Cibic seems to be well aware that forgetting is important in order to both stay focused and be able to think in an abstract manner. Just remember the Ireneo Funes character from Borges' story of the young man who, after an accident, discovers that he cannot forget anything, not a single detail of what he has seen, heard, read or otherwise perceived; hence, swamped by data, he is "almost incapable of general, platonic ideas", as "to think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions".¹⁷ And this curious trilogy is heavily invested in the exploration of forgetting, in the 'cognitive mapping' of what exactly is being forgotten. As

forgetting is an ineluctable element of the only form of mental life that is accessible to us: without it there would be no cognition, no knowledge, no memory. Those who wish to speak about memory, then, must not be silent about oblivion.¹⁸

To be able to bring back this sense of the future, this kind of dementia should be precisely *not* "the kind of forgetting [that] does not erase memory... [but] lays the emotion surrounding the memory to rest", as proposed by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, poet and psychoanalyst.¹⁹ If the sentiment, the experience of the work, presents itself as *something new* to a particular viewer, it remains particular for that viewer; to go back to the beginning of this text, what it does is to create two iterations of *Spielraum*, one in Cibic's "fantastically recreated play space" and another inside the mental space of the viewer.

Thus, in Jasmina Cibic's *Spielraum*, modernity and future coexist as image and memory, as experience and history, and as a potential—as all things in the space of *Spielraum* may or may not be—walking on the ever-thinner line between what was and what may be that produce / present the present of today.

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