

ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY AND INEVITABILITY OF REPRESENTATION

LINA DŽUVEROVIĆ

Why sometimes all you need is a good song, a hot artist or an attractive leader to change perceptions of your national brand?
– Cover of *Monocle Magazine*, no. 49, 2011/2012: Soft Power Survey

Since 2010, the Institute for Government¹ and *Monocle*, the global affairs and lifestyle magazine, founded by the globetrotting style icon Tyler Brulé of *Wallpaper Magazine* fame, have been publishing a Soft Power Index. This annual list charts which nations are making the most of their cultural and business assets. It is drawn up following a complex analysis of five indices, broadly divided into culture, diplomacy, education, business/innovation, and government. Soft power is a way of achieving goals by getting others to do what you want through fostering shared values, as opposed to hard power, which uses coercion or military force. The term soft power, a staple of international affairs and in the language of analysts and states people, has been around for some time, and yet it remains virtually unknown outside of the context of foreign policy. Coined in 1990 by the American foreign policy expert Joseph Nye, the term is defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction

¹ “The Institute for Government is an independent charity helping to improve government effectiveness. Institute for Government works with all the main political parties in Westminster and with senior civil servants in Whitehall, providing evidence based advice that draws on best practice from around the world.” – Institute for Government mission statement, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ (accessed 7 April 2013).

rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideas, and policies. [...] When you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction. Seduction is always more effective than coercion."²

It is only in the past few years, perhaps in part due to *Monocle's* user-friendly and well-publicized Soft Power Index aimed at the general public, that the term has become widely known and frequently discussed in the media, perhaps, at times, without a genuine understanding of its meaning. These days, broadsheets like the UK conservative newspaper *The Daily Mail* are quick to cash in on Britain's status in the soft power survey (last year sharing first place with France), proudly listing British cultural exports such as the new James Bond film, the successful hosting of the Olympics/Paralympics, and the Diamond Jubilee, as proof of Britain's alleged superiority. Instrumentalizing the survey to suit its own agenda, *The Daily Mail* enthusiastically exclaimed that: "The sun may have set on the British Empire, but this country is once again the globe's most powerful nation by at least one yardstick."³

But soft power is clearly more complex and multifaceted than having a few blockbusters, and cultural exports form only one of the components of its wider scope. Charting this somewhat nebulous form of power involves an analysis of fifty indices, which are combined to determine a country's ranking in the Soft Power Index.⁴ These include the amount a country spends on foreign scholarships, number of Unesco World Heritage Sites, number of environmental treaties signed, income inequality, violent crime rate as well as more public cultural markers such as number of film exports, number of Olympic medals, Nobel laureates, and hits in the global top 50.

Soft power, then, is essentially a measure of how "likeable" a country is, how able it is to represent itself in the most favourable light by capitalizing on its positive points, and is something to which governments across the globe are paying increasing attention. It is less about a country's actual number and quality of assets and more about its ability to recognize, nurture, and benefit from (and market) its potential. Not

2 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York, 2004.

3 Tom Kelly, "Britain ousts the U.S. as world's most influential nation: Country tops rankings for 'soft power'", *Daily Mail Online*, 18 November 2012, updated 19 November 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2234726/Britain-tops-global-soft-power-list.html#ixzz2QEWJv6VH> (accessed 6 March 2013).

4 In 2011/2012, *Monocle's* survey increased the number of factors countries are judged against in the Soft Power Index to fifty. The total number of countries in the survey was thirty. (Steve Bloomfield, "Tender Is the Might", *Monocle*, no. 49, p. 42.)

unlike sex appeal, it has little to do with “natural beauty” and more to do with the ability to flaunt whatever one has, in the most marketable way, capitalizing on what one has to work with. As it happens, soft power, according to *Monocle*, is easier to lose than to obtain in the first place. Sometimes a freak incident – mad cow disease, a mass murder, or a traffic disaster – can send a country’s image abroad spiralling downwards.

The relationship between cultural production and top-down national representation has always been a fraught one. In Barthesian terms, if myth is depoliticized speech, then the very task of national representation and soft power is to mythologize – and market – the cultural and social life of a country, depoliticizing it in the process by removing its social context and history, and only presenting the myth of its image (Brit pop, cool Britannia, French cuisine or Scandinavian furniture design being just a few examples of cultural myths). If the mythic level of the sign becomes a way of concealing the country’s actual nature by presenting itself as truth, then soft power is the ultimate myth-making tool.

From the point of view of the cultural worker – artist, musician, curator, playwright – soft power is the unmentionable. It is a dirty word, synonymous with instrumentalizing culture for other, perhaps, at times, sinister, political goals. For discerning artists, curators, or producers – to embrace this terminology would mean to actively take part in the creation of a myth, to be complicit with a system of which they may be highly critical, and from which they may wish to remain independent, regardless of which nation they belong to. Agencies of soft power like the Alliance Française, the British Council, and the Goethe Institut are the acceptable buffers of cultural diplomacy, mediating between governance and practice “on the ground”, to the broad acceptance of all parties. But a direct head-on acceptance or declaration that a cultural work is actively contributing to the fostering of a certain national image, is something rarely embraced by the individual artist. Of course, at the same time, the artist may be fully aware that soft power is “the name of the game” and, that in cultural work of any kind, this is the language we speak in every funding application, in every sponsorship deal to which we agree and, above all, with every opportunity to appear at a national level in any form of a representational role. We are aware that by signing on the dotted line we are agreeing that our art, our theatre productions, or our texts broadly add to, enhance, and illustrate the strategic vision of our funder, sponsor, or nation. Through our work, we become complicit in the construction of the mythology of a nation and its cultural policy. Like actors performing

to a script, we become part of a narrative, one of many parts of the puzzle that commodifies the cultural life of a nation.

In her recent work entitled *Why an Artist Cannot Represent a Nation State* staged at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Val-de-Marne, France (2012), artist Sanja Iveković, in collaboration with philosopher and long time collaborator Rada Iveković, presented a performance dealing with the impossibility of national representation. The work was prompted precisely by the fact that Iveković was invited to exhibit during the year of Croatia in France, in the context of a national festival entitled *Croatie, la voici*. It would be hard to find an artist whose work is less likely to serve an ambassadorial purpose, as Iveković is the kind of artist who stands for the marginalized, dispossessed, often highlighting the very social problems that cultural diplomacy tends to gloss over in favour of happier, more glamorous imagery. For Iveković, the only way to participate in *Croatie, la voici* was to challenge and highlight the absurdity of the situation. At one point during the performance, we hear Rada Iveković exclaim:

Representation is an eternal puzzle of politics as well as of art. It is in both cases at once impossible yet attempted again and again; impracticable but necessary. You better be represented in some way than poorly represented, and the worst is not to be represented at all. Art and politics revolve around these two poles – the impossibility and yet the inevitability of representation.⁵

There is no better embodiment of the “impossibility and inevitability of representation” than the internationally revered Venice Biennale. The complexity of such an arena comes to the fore through the inherent contradiction between national representation and the exhibiting artists’ resistance to representing anything or anybody but themselves. Anxious but complicit, critical but excited, the art world and its protagonists continue to embrace, use, and abuse this diplomatic extravaganza, feeding off the co-dependent relationship between national interest and content providers. For an individual to accept, even momentarily, any form of national identification, and furthermore, representation, would mean to accept that there is an absolute, solid, grounded essence of belonging, to accept that everything outside of that is *other* – and therein lies the problem.

5 Transcript of the performance *Pourquoi un(e) artiste ne peut représenter un État nation* by Sanja Iveković. Script by Sanja Iveković and Rada Iveković, performed at the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Val-de-Marne, France, 21 October 2012.

In *For Our Economy and Culture*, Jasmina Cibic tackles this very “impossibility and inevitability” of representation in a Groysian “paradox-object”: an image and a critique of the image at the same time. Cibic dissects the mechanisms of national representation, or rather she over-identifies with them, embodying and channelling the processes and strategies employed in the creation and selection of national iconography. The viewer is immersed in an environment in which every element carries a historical narrative and illuminates the power relations and negotiations that are at play in the selection process.

One of the videos in Cibic’s installation shows a heated discussion where what is being debated is whether an artwork in question is fit to represent a nation. It is difficult to tell what the nature of the work is, or how it could possibly be so *wrong*, so inappropriate, to inspire such impassioned reactions from the committee. Is it Cibic’s own work that is being scrutinized in such terms?

It soon becomes evident that the work that is being discussed could be *any* artwork and that what we are witnessing is a moment of the formation of national iconography – a moment of mythmaking. This could be any meeting room, any country, and, perhaps most disturbingly, any era. The set of values, the desire to create a positive impression, to remove the image from its narrative, to remove it from its conditions of production, and present it as *truth*, whatever shape that may take, remains universal.

Cibic’s source material, as it turns out, is a transcript of a committee meeting held in Ljubljana, then Yugoslavia, on 7 March 1958. A committee of high-ranking Yugoslav officials has gathered to discuss the progress of commissioned works that would adorn the new building of the People’s Assembly in Ljubljana, a modernist edifice designed by the architect Vinko Glanz. The subject of the discussion is a triptych by the commissioned artist Gabriel Stupica, whose response to the commission’s instructions to paint “the fruit of our lands” is met with criticism and doubt. Gradually the committee brings into question every aspect of the artist’s work: Is it appropriate? Is this how we want the world to see us? Is this who we are? Every element of Stupica’s work is under scrutiny, from the format (it is a triptych – does that not have religious connotations, which would be acceptable for a socialist country, the committee implies) to the choice and depiction of the motifs. Stupica’s interpretation of “the fruits of our land”, it soon becomes apparent, is not acceptable to the committee. In one of the more passionate moments, eminent art historian, Dr. Stane Mikuž, exclaims:

I personally believe that this thing absolutely doesn't belong in the People's Assembly, both because of the content and motifs, not to forget that its attitude towards our people is inappropriate. What is portrayed here are some hags, not our women....flower ladies, lace sellers, and greengrocers certainly can't represent our people.⁶

This debate took place at the height of a period in Yugoslav art known as socialist modernism, the dominant, government-supported official art expression throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Fuelled by the input into the country from its newly developed connections with the West, yet produced in an art system not entirely emancipated from the strong ideological guidance of pre-1948⁷ Yugoslavia, socialist modernism still carried traces of socialist realism (which was short-lived in Yugoslavia, ending in 1952). Art historian Ješa Denegri describes this unique form of modernism developed in the Yugoslav artistic space as one that “emerged as such only in Yugoslavia, thus constituting a unique formation resulting from the cross-breeding of the properties of the Eastern and Western art model.”⁸

The significance of the committee meeting which forms the basis of Cibic's video can only be fully understood in the context of the enormous importance that Yugoslavia placed on culture in the years following the split with USSR. Culture proved to be of key significance in communicating Yugoslavia's new political course to the world. It was not long after June 1948 that the new pro-Western climate in the country prompted a complete reorientation of Yugoslavia's cultural policy as a way of demonstrating the country's new ideological orientation towards the West, an orientation which closely mirrored Tito's political motivations and strategic direction, and was directly aimed at gaining the approval of the US and Western European countries through the fostering of shared cultural values. This was achieved through open communication with key

6 Stenographic minutes of the Commission for the Review of Artistic and Sculptural Works in the New Palace of the People's Assembly PRS, which took place on 7 March 1958 at the People's Assembly (the parliament building) of the People's Republic of Slovenia in Ljubljana.

7 Following the June 1948 expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) and the end of Soviet dominance over the country, Yugoslavia began to pursue a markedly different political course from the USSR and the Soviet Bloc, one based on internationalism, neutrality, and the gradual development of diplomatic relations with the West. This course culminated in Yugoslavia becoming one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961.

8 Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories: Historic Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1999*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2003, p. 173.

Western art centres, the import of films from the West, and Yugoslavia's gradual transformation into a fertile ground for international touring exhibitions of Western art which were not just supported but fully encouraged and mediated by cultural and political institutions.

The climate, at this point, rapidly shifted from artists being seen as active agents at the service of the state, responsible for disseminating and strengthening party ideology by depicting working class heroes and promoting values such as self-sacrifice and courage,⁹ to being viewed (or at least officially treated) as independent thinkers and cultural workers whose overall cultural formation and independent thought was in the interest of the state.

The committee meeting is an interesting case study, both in the context of this new liberalized approach to culture, as it illustrates the limits of the reorientation of Yugoslavia's cultural policy, but also on a universal level, as it more broadly reveals the mechanisms of construction of national iconography.

Victor Burgin has said that "the only imaginable non-political being is a totally self-sufficient hermit",¹⁰ alluding to the impossibility of remaining independent of the wider system in which an artist operates. If all art is complicit to some extent with the superstructures within which it develops and operates, does even the most critical voice become muted when presented within the market driven ecosystem of biennials and exhibitions at the service of national iconography? Is non-participation the only possibility of autonomy? As the work by Sanja Iveković suggests, self-imposed exclusion is not a solution either ("You better be represented in some way than poorly represented, and the worst is not to be represented at all"), because what does non-participation achieve? The impossibility of an autonomous voice suggests that perhaps the only option may be to work with the possibilities of being represented in *some* way, rather than in no way at all.

9 From 1947 on, as part of the first five-year plan, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia supported the creation of numerous cultural and artistic associations on a Yugoslav and also regional level (in the individual republics). This policy was aimed at attracting artists who would, through ideological influence, inspire bodies of artistic work that would be placed at the service of promoting and spreading socialist beliefs. As art was seen as the property of the people, works that were produced had to be populist, accessible to a mass audience, and act as a reflection and documentation of reality. In the case of literature, depiction of working class heroes and freedom fighters was encouraged. Themes of courage, self-discipline, and personal sacrifice to create a better collective future were endorsed. Simple and clear aesthetics were to follow socialist principles.

10 Victor Burgin, "Art, Common Sense and Photography", in Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds., *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Sage Publications, London, 1999, p. 41.

Cibic's over-identification with her role as the Slovenian representative at the Venice Biennial proposes one possible model for dealing with the problem of representation – that of *becoming* the mythmaking machine only to reveal in the process the mechanisms of depoliticization.