

SHIFTS IN VOICE

What, How & for Whom (WHW)

At the core of Jasmina Cibic's *Spielraum* trilogy is an inquiry into different forms of public address through art and architecture. In the first chapter, *The Nation Loves It*, a woman is speaking while walking through what appears to be the scenography in a TV studio. At some points, this looks like a rehearsal for a speech, at others, like a strangely distracted monologue. Although fragmentary and seemingly unprepared, the speech is clearly intended to be uplifting and addresses a wide audience, ranging from references to laying foundations in order to construct a new edifice to laying the foundations for shaping the society as a whole, and from the personal 'I' to the grand 'we'. Yet there is something slightly off about the whole set-up, a crack revealed in the orator's awkward stumbles and attempts to find the most convincing wording. The atmosphere oscillates ever so slightly between composed serenity and pointless haughtiness. The irony of the situation manifests itself already in the title of the work—*The Nation Loves It*—which takes a critical stance towards sensationalist newspaper headlines in which the nation is personified, turned into a mythical being celebrating the successes and mourning the failures of its citizens in sports, science or the arts. Some of the core preoccupations of Cibic's artistic practice concern how national myths are produced, how they get consumed in different historical, social and geopolitical contexts, and the role of art in this process.

Multiple historical references appear in all three *Spielraum* films, from fragments of political speeches from opposing sides of the political spectrum to the blueprints of edifices built during the post-Second World War period of economic prosperity and growth in Yugoslavia. These are used to script the narrative as well as construct the highly stylised architectural settings that reference, in turn, TV broadcasting, theatre production and cinema. In her approach to historical

material, Cibic employs fragmentation and recontextualisation in order to probe the ways in which highly constructed discourses are made to feel natural and 'common'. Through various elements, from the use of sound to the meticulously designed costumes and geometrical objects that keep reappearing throughout the story, *Spielraum* evokes both the atmosphere of high modernism of the 1950s and 1960s and an indeterminate future. These elements are brought together with the excerpts from political speeches and collaged in a way that reveals the manipulation inherent in the creation of populist political discourses, particularly the ones used to create the notion of the unified and monolithic nation state, as well as the role of cultural production in these processes. Cibic displaces the trust of the spectator through exposing the element of 'rehearsal', through introducing slightly surreal elements that challenge an easy acceptance of what is going on, and finally through unexpectedly bringing in different registers. Despite the serenity of the tone and the high design of the settings, cracks, inconsistencies and contradictions are revealed. Odd elements, visible shifts, cuts and strange juxtapositions are inserted into the narrative, disrupting the easy flow of the story and shattering the illusions of linearity.

Just like the present, history can never be fully grasped in its totality. Interpretations of seminal events are endlessly contested; ideological fights erupt over their meaning and consequences, and often over their very basic facts. With the growth of social rupture and uncertainty, public discourse becomes flooded with passionate invocations and renouncements of historical figures and movements. In times of acute economic crises such as our own one, retrograde ideologies, which for a number of decades seemed relegated to 'the dustbin of history', rear their heads and find advocates among mainstream scholars and politicians, and

entire societies get sucked into a perpetual vortex of conflict based on inherited allegiances, while nuanced and complex research and interpretation of narratives of the past are in short supply. With the dissolution of modernity and its grand narratives we have come to acknowledge a complex web of constantly shifting relations among heterogeneous and often competing histories, rather than an unceasing progression of events whose links remain inevitable and 'set in stone'. However, we should remember that, as Griselda Pollock points out: "Specific historical knowledge is a vital defence against postmodernist suspension of history".¹

For the setting of her films *Cibic* returns to the 1950s and early 1960s in Yugoslavia—years that were marked by the building of the new welfare state, a growth in economic prosperity of the general population and post-Second World War optimism. These were the years that preceded the first severe economic crises, as well as the resurgence of nationalism in the early 1970s. While the fictional TV studio and the theatre stage that appear in the first two parts were built specifically for the trilogy, the cinematic last chapter *Tear Down and Rebuild* takes place at the former Palace of the Federation of Yugoslavia in Belgrade. On the one hand, the films in *Spielraum* are shot in a way that emphasises the beauty and seductiveness of the modernist project, but on the other, there is a feeling of detachment that permeates the work, coming from the tone and the stance of the protagonists. Each utterance sounds impersonal and is spoken as though recorded for some indeterminate posterity.

This is unsurprising, given that the source material comes from political speeches and administrative documents. But unlike the film settings and the visual references, which all come from the same register of socialist high modernism, the fragments that form the dialogues come from a variety of sources, both historical and contemporary, and are ideologically as disparate as they could possibly be, ranging from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* to Josip Broz Tito's address to a delegation of architects, to speeches by the Prince of Wales. Their amalgamation and seeming interchangeability profoundly challenge the possibility of specific historical knowledge invoked by Pollock almost 30 years ago.² What are the monuments supposed to stand for after the ideology that was behind them collapsed and the society that built them ceased to exist? Since 1989, this question has been problematised by numerous artists in relation to post-communist states, but *Cibic* complicates the question by moving it away from a reflection upon the demise of one particular ideology, examining instead the ways in which different values within society are accentuated or abandoned, and how this is consequently reflected in the production of art. She looks into some of the central driving forces of the modernist project, the notions of growth, rebuilding and progress in particular, but chooses to conjure up both its optimism and its failures, its calls for emancipation and the oppression of its top-down approach.

In his proposal for a new vocabulary for discussing current transformations in the arts, Stephen Wright writes about conceptual edifices we all dwell in, that "shelter and

confine us, with or without our consent, even in the great outdoors", noting that

without users, they are just empty shells; with time, they come to bear the brunt of usership's wear and tear and ultimately can no longer contain the uses to which they [were] put.³

He points out that

many conceptual edifices of modernity, including Spectatorship, Authorship, the Aesthetic Function of Art, the Nation State and Productivism are showing signs of severe stress and need to be torn down so their constituent parts can be put to new ends.⁴

In *Spielraum*, *Cibic* recasts the persistent question of the status of these edifices of modernity in a context in which the answer seems obvious—that of large-scale architecture, in itself impossible without significant state or business patronage. Despite the feeling of enclosure and conflation present in the fragments of speeches from adverse political standpoints, *Spielraum* aims towards a reaffirmation of the resilience of art, of its ability to create interactions between objects and its various protagonists, interactions that elude instrumentalisation. The visual elements, such as the costumes and scenography, the sound, the dancers who appear in the second part as in a sort of intermezzo, as well as the beauty of the Palace of Federation itself, defy the rigidity of the spoken proclamations.

They become elements within a larger coordinate system, whose aim is to point to art's manoeuvring space, dismissing the superficial dichotomy on two different levels—between art's decorative and utilitarian functions, and between art in the East and the West. As Ketī Chukhrov points out,

the pursuit of Western social democracy in post-socialist states turned out to be somewhat belated, since the social democracy programs in the Western neoliberal societies themselves shrunk and became obsolete.

This resulted in Western cultural institutions professing to "export and disseminate something that they themselves were no longer able to practice or believe in".⁵ Chukhrov advocates "an analysis that evades both Cold War discourse and nostalgia alike",⁶ and while the juxtaposition of fragments of speeches by diverse political figures is certainly not an analysis, it provides an estrangement effect that moves the spectators away from nostalgia, while at the same time challenging the normalised discourse which asserts the inevitability of transition of post-communist countries towards liberal capitalism.

It has been clear for a while that, whilst welfare, legal protection and human rights are being washed away by the flow of the free market on all sides of the East-West and North-South divide, the only thing left from the previously self-evident mechanisms of the state is a burgeoning repressive apparatus, needed to curb the revolt against

¹ Pollock, Griselda, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art*, London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2003, p. 217.

² *Vision and Difference* was originally published in 1988.

³ Wright, Stephen, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013, p. 18.

⁴ Wright, *Toward a Lexicon*, 2013, p. 18.

⁵ Chukhrov, Ketī, "Epistemological Gaps between the Former Soviet East and the 'Democratic' West", *e-flux*, no. 41, January 2013, www.e-flux.com/journal/41/60226/epistemological-gaps-between-the-former-soviet-east-and-the-democratic-west/.

⁶ Chukhrov, "Epistemological Gaps", 2013.

the dismantling of basic state services. However, as Judith Butler notes in her conversation with Gayatri Spivak, while “the state is a minimal abstract structure which we must protect because it is our ally [and] should be the instrument of redistribution”, in building oppositions, we should also “keep abstract structures of the states free of the prejudices of nationalism”.⁷ But how can one keep the perspective of critical internationalism, in the face of recent sinister political developments and conflicts along national and religious lines? And how to keep a positive attitude towards the state, one that would not forcibly align its interests with that of one particular nation? The calm and poise of the protagonists in the films is in sharp contrast with the violent demise of the state and the society that inspired and built the architectural settings in which the work takes place. Maybe it is precisely this quiet composure that gives the work a distinctive futurist feel, or perhaps it is the fact that all of the speaking protagonists of *Spielraum* are women. For the role of Mother Nation in *The Nation Loves It*, the choice of a female character is clear, as with the two women in *Give Expression to Common Desires*, who, whilst stitching the stage curtains, deliver stern instructions on commendable artistic strategies and aesthetic approaches, which could be read as an ironic take on the role of the female muse.

But in the final chapter, *Tear Down and Rebuild*, women occupy the roles that were traditionally reserved for men—the Nation-Builder, the Pragmatist, the Conservationist and the Artist-Architect. The construct

of ‘woman’, together with the figures of mother, sister and waiting lover, has been foundational in the creation of national myths, becoming a set of shorthand metaphors for the notions of belonging and home. For years, feminism has been creating different models of relations to serve as escape routes out of this straitjacket, constructing the non-nationalist modes of belonging that Butler and Spivak call for, and changing the rules about who gets to speak and what are the central concerns in this struggle. In *Spielraum*, Jasmina Cibic appropriates the words of antagonistic, often highly unlikeable power figures, shifting the voice without advance notice, revealing the public address as staged and constructed, all in an attempt to move away from engaged art’s perceived earnestness, from being easily defined by its political alliances. TJ Clark writes about the fact that modernist artists

by and large could never escape the notion that art would absolve or transfigure its circumstances, and find a way back to totality.⁸

In calling upon the modernist tradition and borrowing freely from its visual and architectural repository in *Spielraum*, Cibic does not go back to modernist totality, but instead looks for contradiction in this history that still by and large defines us, the contradiction that “must be relied upon, exposed, and worked on to move towards something new”.⁹

7

Butler, Judith, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, London, New York and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007, pp 97–98.

8

Clark, TJ, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, p 11.

9

Butler and Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, 2007, p 67.