

SPEAKING ALLEGORIES

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Architecture plays a crucial role in establishing power relations and promoting processes of identification. In constructing a specific relation to the body, architecture is never neutral; on the contrary, it can be apprehended as a social construct in which identity formations take place. The constructed space actively participates in regulating human activities and interactions in ways that are profoundly informed by sexual difference. I would like to address Jasmina Cibic's *Spielraum* from the point of view of a feminist critique of the interplay between power, architecture and the gendered body. *Spielraum* is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (synthesis of the arts) comprising film, performance, sound, sculpture and installation, in which the artist explores the connection between the performative power of discourse and the architectural environment. Its central focus is an inquiry into the ways in which architecture can become the incarnation of national ideologies. By juxtaposing a montage of statements, inaugural speeches and other sources with a scenographic space inspired by modernist public architecture, Cibic interrogates the entwinement between language, decoration and the body.

Spielraum overturns the relation between speech and decoration, suggesting that buildings are not just a product of discourse but its own content. How can the relationship between nationalism and the realm of aesthetics be apprehended through its built manifestation? How can nationalism become an architectural spectacle? What is the role of sexual difference in the representation of a national community from which women are virtually excluded? Leaving aside the work's complexity, I will focus on the films that are at the centre of the three chapters which constitute the whole project, in order to examine how 'the building of a nation' is inevitably predicated on women's subordination.

The characters appearing in the *Spielraum* film trilogy are impersonated exclusively by female performers, a fact that first drew my attention to the connection between architecture, the nation and the female body. Cibic has stated that it related to the absence of women from the most visible aspects in the construction of the patriarchal spectacle of the state, as well as with the symbolic role of the feminine as allegory.¹ On the one hand, women are virtually excluded from the national community, while on the other, the image of the feminine is appropriated

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E-mail conversation with the artist,
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to represent a number of ideals whose role is to bind the community together: consequently, women are expelled from the realm of governance and find themselves relegated to representation.

The first part of the *Spielraum* trilogy deals precisely with the symbolic meaning of the feminine in the formation of the national community. Its title, *The Nation Loves It*, explicitly refers to the idea of birth and the role of woman in both the production and the reproduction of the (male) national community. The film revolves around a single female character impersonating Mother Nation, whose attire seems to be inspired by decorative elements from the surrounding environment. The film shows her rehearsing a speech of explicit and fragmented political content; this rehearsal is interspersed with scenes of her interaction with the sculptural and decorative elements. During her speech the woman almost merges into the scenography through the play of fabric, colour and forms. Her identification with Mother Nation coheres with her integration into the architectural environment: the woman's symbolic function connects her to the realm of aesthetics. However, the woman is speaking, and what she is saying seems to contradict her symbolic role, as she draws from speeches given by different political figures that shaped the history of the twentieth century, such as Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterrand and Nikita Khrushchev. The excerpts are edited in a way that exposes the ideological implications of public architecture. Thus, the impression is that the character is commencing the same speech again and again, without ever arriving at a definitive version, as if she were caught in an endless rehearsal.

The speech contradictorily identifies Mother Nation with the political leader or the charismatic persona whose role is parallel to, but distinct from, the one played by the feminine in modern national formations. In fact, the performance exposes an uncanny connection between the woman's symbolic role and her performance. Feminist political thinker Rada Iveković argues that the very idea of the nation is connected with the notion of birth, as it has to do with the way one's origin is constructed. On a symbolic level, the maternal body of Mother Nation represents the unity of a group in which the singularity of its members is denied for the sake of belonging and unity. Of course, Iveković continues, the nation is constituted by a male community of brothers converging towards their symbolic father (the

father of the nation, the political leader, etc). It is the role of the symbolic Mother Nation to bring the community together. She is the symbolic father's visionary project, a possible figuration of the dream of totality. This is the reason why notions such as 'nation', 'homeland' and 'community' are strongly associated with images of the female body in the development of modern national discourses.² In Cibic's *The Nation Loves It*, Mother Nation's speech blurs the distinction between the gendered roles of the mother and the political leader. She ambivalently personifies both of them and exposes the connection between the production of gender identification within nationalist rhetorical strategies and the built environment, which is where gender hierarchies are represented and thus produced.

The speech is further fragmented by scenes in which we see the character interacting with a number of scenographic and sculptural elements installed in a space that recalls both a gallery and a theatre stage. This manipulation of the mise-en-scène resonates with the trilogy's following chapter, where different parts of the installation become integrated in a theatrical display in the form of a performance involving several dancers, male and female. The second film, *Give Expression to Common Desires*, which is much shorter than the previous one, includes two interrelated performances. Two female characters relay short instructions to one another whilst stitching a multicoloured stage curtain. The curtains hang closed while the women on stage are working on them, which positions them ambivalently between labour and performance. Their costumes and gestures also recall the ancient figure of the chorus, whose role was to introduce and comment on what was happening on stage. In addition, the fact that they are performing a traditionally feminine task contradicts the tone and content of what they are saying, which is, once again, based on a selection of speeches on architecture and monuments. There is no real dialogue between the two women, but a series of short, affirmative statements in which questions of authority and power come into play. The content of the exchange is often prescriptive, as if they were giving orders to each other. However, the actresses' performance modulates the dialogue's intensity in a way that oscillates between antagonism and collaboration, imposition and complicity. Here the contradiction is not so much between the two characters per se, but between their feminised role, posture and labour, and the set of gendered meanings that are conveyed by their declarations.

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Iveković, Rada, *Le sexe de la nation*, Paris: Léo Scheer, 2003.

As the title of the trilogy, derived from Karl Kraus' 1912 essay, suggests, questions of architecture and language are entwined in their political meaning. As one of the crucial representatives of what has been termed 'anti-modern modernity', together with Adolf Loos, Kraus praised the separation between art and everyday life, and affirmed his opposition to what he perceived as confused, blurred or languid forms. As Jacques Le Rider has convincingly argued, Kraus' struggle against ornamentation takes the form of anti-feminist discourse, in which he affirms the need for a rigid separation between the sexes as the only way to secure social unity and order.³ The *Spielraum* project, in its contradictory use of modernist forms and language, subtly undermines the gendered connection between the struggle against ornamentation and the construction of a homogeneous nationalist space.

The *Spielraum* trilogy also refers to the opposition between history and allegory as two distinctive and gendered modes of historical representation. In her symbolic function (Mother Nation), the woman belongs to the realm of allegory and, as such, she is identified with representation: she is silenced and petrified. History, on the other hand, is in the hands of the political leader and the male community: it entails narrative, action and conflicts involving the subjectivity of thought and action. Allegory, as Craig Owens has famously observed, is the "epitome of counter-narrative, for it arrests narrative in place", its structure is sequential and its result is not dynamic, but static, ritualistic, repetitive.⁴ One could argue that this 'allegorical impulse' is at the core of the *Spielraum* trilogy, since its narrative structure appears constantly caught between repetitions and rituals.

This is examined further in the third part of the trilogy, entitled *Tear Down and Rebuild*, which takes place in the Palace of the Federation (now the Palace of Serbia) in Belgrade. The Palace was born out of Tito's ambition to provide a national building that could reflect the idea of a modern socialist republic. Following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, the building has now become an icon of national heritage emptied of its potential for political representation.⁵ The building's interior spaces are among the principal protagonists of Cibic's film, which features a conversation between four female characters impersonating respectively the Nation-Builder, the Pragmatist, the Conservationist and the Artist-Architect. Each character

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Le Rider, Jacques, *Modernité viennoise et crise de l'identité*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990, pp 142–145.

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Owens, Craig, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism", *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p 57.

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The three films all make a reference to the architecture and urban planning associated with the first conference of the Non-Aligned Movement, held in 1961 in Belgrade, and to the Palace of the Federation (today Palace of Serbia), which was built between 1947 and 1961 in the same city (and which subsequently hosted the conference). This choice indicates that the historical background of Cibic's inquiry is the Cold War period, with its modernist utopias of internationalism and emancipation, even if the written sources she refers to exceed that context.

represents a different attitude towards architecture. The discussion revolves around buildings and monuments and their significance on a public and national level. This time, however, the focus is not so much on the inaugural moment, or the ideals connected to monumental endeavours, but rather on demolition, iconoclasm and transformation. Their dialogue is composed of a variety of quotes dealing with these issues, spanning across the twentieth and twenty-first century, from Albert Speer's plans for Berlin during the Third Reich, to Ronald Reagan's speech about the Berlin Wall, or ISIS' recent proclamations on the destruction of temples and monuments. The conversation takes place across several spaces in the Palace: the central conference room, the lobby and one of the salons.

There is in fact no real discussion in the film; instead, once again, there are a series of statements that are juxtaposed *as if* the women were engaged in a discussion. The conversation grows in intensity and becomes increasingly antagonistic as the impetus towards destruction, as opposed to conservation, becomes more tangible. The film repeatedly returns to the architectural and decorative elements of the Palace, with its modernist furniture, monumental frescos, tapestries and sculptures, which constitute the background against which the very idea of tearing down and rebuilding takes shape. The four women wear elegant monochrome dresses that reinforce the feeling that they are an integral part of the Palace's internal architecture. Their function is at the same time decorative and discursive, allegorical and narrational. The content of their declarations pertains to the role of architecture in historical processes, and they seem to act as if they were active historical subjects themselves. However, the conversation appears fractured, the fervour and the highly controversial content of the statements seem at odds with the metaphorical quality the four characters are supposed to represent. The relation that the film establishes between bodies and spaces constantly reframes the four women in the realm of symbols and allegories.

Tear Down and Rebuild escalates the contradictions between history and representation, which structure the entire trilogy, to a new level. Across the three films, this opposition emerges, in its entanglement with sexual difference, as the hidden basis upon which national ideals are produced and affirmed. If buildings (their construction, destruction and transformation) produce political meaning, they are also inextricably entangled with the contradictory forces that

shape our present. The *Spielraum* film trilogy reflects upon the modern idea of the nation and its current transformation, in a time marked by the spectacular (and brutal) renewal of European nationalism, and by the crisis (and sometimes the collapse) of the modern state form, both within and outside the borders of Europe. Within these dramatic changes, the need to uncover nationalism's aesthetic and gendered foundations can become a useful way to start building a different future.