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“Someone will have to clear away the ruins”:  
Dubravka Ugrešić and *Trümmerliteratur Redux*

David Williams

*A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature  
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## ABSTRACT

Framed by Heinrich Böll's programmatic essay "Bekenntnis zur Trümmerliteratur" ("Commitment to a Literature of the Ruins," 1952), and Slovenian writer Drago Jančar's idea of a "literature of the 'east European ruins'" (2004), the present study is primarily concerned with the post-Yugoslav writings of novelist and essayist Dubravka Ugrešić as literary responses to both the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>1</sup> Centring on Ugrešić's writings, it suggests that since the end of communism east European writers have been forced to confront the manifold ruins of language, literature, a utopian (yet disgraced) ideology, a distinct cultural space, not to mention almost half a century of everyday life, one inevitably buried as belonging to a compromised past. In this respect, in the post-1989 period, east European writers created what might be instructively called *Trümmerliteratur Redux*, a body of literature underpinned and scarred by the semantic field of ruins: melancholia and nostalgia, loss and restoration, presence and absence, pride and shame, and not least, remembering and forgetting. Examining the polysemic figure of the ruin in writings by Ugrešić and others, the present study suggests *Trümmerliteratur Redux* as an amorphous, anti-formative framework within postcommunist literary studies, one that also dramatically illuminates the post-1989 ruins of east European literature itself—what remains when, as György Konrád put it, "something is over."

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<sup>1</sup> The citation in the title of my study is borrowed from that of a recent interview given by Ugrešić. See "Neko će morati da ukloni ruševine," *Pescanik.net*, <http://pescanik.net/2012/01/neko-ce-morati-da-ukloni-rusevine> [accessed January 10, 2012].

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<sup>1</sup> Personal e-mail communication, February 26, 2010. “Što se samoće tiče, problem je u tome što se ne možemo pomiriti s činjenicom da je samoća—radna soba. Odnosno radna soba je—samoća.”

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	II
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	III
<b>1. EXERCISES IN POLYSEMY</b>	1
1.1 Beginnings (1)	1
1.2 Beginnings (2)	5
1.3 Beginnings (3)	9
1.4 Ruinology and Ruinophilia	11
1.5 Postcommunist Ruins: Agency and Aesthetics	18
1.6 <i>Regarding the Pain of Others</i>	28
1.7 “[e]astern Europe”	37
1.8 Other Caveats	45
1.9 What Might Jančar Have Had in Mind?	49
1.10 Architecture	56
<b>2. “THE CITIZEN OF A RUIN”</b>	61
2.1 Poets and Hangmen	61
2.2 “The Muse of Censorship”	65
2.3 “Something Is Over”	67
2.4 Between East and West	69
2.5 “If life had to write novels, there wouldn’t be any”	73
2.6 “EEW” (East European Writer)	77

2.7 The Émigré Writer and the Archive	82
2.8. “Clean Croatian Air”	85
2.9 “The Witches of Rio”	88
2.10 “Gingerbread Heart Culture”	98
2.11 The Croatian <i>Kulturkampf</i> , the Émigré Writer, and Literary History	107
2.12 Omission, Elision, Derision	112
2.13 In the Ruins of Exile	116
2.14 “Writers Who Disappear”	121
2.15 Backscratching and Backstabbing	124
<b>3. DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ: MUZEJ BEZUVJETNE PREDAJE (1997)</b>	132
3.1 “No one is the same any more”	132
3.2 Berlin	141
3.3 Art and Ekphrasis	151
3.4 Family Museums	158
3.5 Angels and Psychograms	164
3.6 <i>Homo Poeticus</i> and <i>Homo Politicus</i>	171
3.7 Reception	173
<b>4. DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ: MINISTARSTVO BOLI (2004)</b>	188
4.1 “Homesick and sick of home”	188
4.2 <i>Trümmerleute</i>	189
4.3 Amsterdam	194
4.4 Reflective Nostalgia, <i>Jugonostalgija</i> , <i>Ostalgie</i>	199
4.5 In the Ruins of Language	210
4.6 In the Ruins of Literature	213

4.7 In the Ruins of Home	225
4.8 An Eastern Sadness	230
4.9 Pessimism and New Happiness	235
4.10 Reception	236
<b>5. TRÜMMERLITERATUR REDUX</b>	252
5.1 “Where does the sadness in me come from?”	252
5.2 Ingo Schulze: <i>Simple Storys: Ein Roman aus der ostdeutschen Provinz</i> (1998)	254
5.3 Clemens Meyer: <i>Als wir träumten</i> (2006)	267
5.4 Jáchym Topol: <i>Sestra</i> (1994)	280
5.5 Milan Kundera: <i>L’Ignorance</i> (2002)	293
5.6 Dubravka Ugrešić: <i>Baba Jaga je snijela jaje</i> (2008)	307
<b>6. “THE FUTURE HAS NO FUTURE”</b>	323
6.1 Endings (1)	323
6.2 Endings (2)	324
6.3 Endings (3)	326
6.4 The Ruin Virus	330
6.5 The Once Was and the What Is	336
<b>APPENDIX</b>	341
<b>DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ—BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	342

# 1. EXERCISES IN POLYSEMY

## 1.1 Beginnings (1)

Opening her first collection of essays, Dubravka Ugrešić noted that “[e]very book has its own personal story of coming into being,” one that “remains hidden from the reader and usually has meaning only for the author.” Yet as she concedes, “[s]ometimes . . . it is hard to separate the story of its coming into being from the book itself, sometimes the story of its making *is* the book itself.”<sup>1</sup> The present study needs to be more than the story of its coming into being, not least because it is difficult for me to pinpoint exactly when and where work on it actually began. But in the belief that its beginnings might usefully illuminate several of its main lines—and also perhaps, one or two dead ends—I wish to begin by shining a retrospective light on several early encounters that significantly shaped its development.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Američki fikcionar* (Zagreb: Durieux, 1993; Zagreb: Konzor; Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2002), 10 (all Croatian page numbers refer to the 2002 edition); trans. Celia Hawkesworth as *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream*, (New York: Viking, 1995), 9. Croatian: “Svaka knjiga ima svoju intimnu povijest nastanka. Ona, ta povijest, za čitaoca ostaje skrivenom i ima značaj samo za autora. Ponekad je, međutim, teško odvojiti priču o nastanku od same knjige, ponekad je priča o nastanku sama knjiga.” The collection's short pieces were originally written as weekly columns entitled “My American Dictionary” for the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* while Ugrešić was lecturing at Wesleyan University in Middleton, Connecticut in 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Where practicable the present study adheres to Chicago referencing style. All citations are given in English in the body of the text. For primary texts (the fiction and essays of Dubravka Ugrešić, the novels by Schulze, Meyer, Topol, and Kundera in Chapter Five), the source language text is also given in footnotes, with Topol's novel being the exception given that Czech is beyond my linguistic competence. In the case of Meyer's untranslated novel all translations are my own. When citing the official translation of secondary texts the source text is not supplied. When citing from secondary texts originally written in Croatian/Serbian, German, and French, for which no official translation exists (and hence I have translated), the source text is supplied in footnotes. In this regard, all translations contained in this study are my own unless otherwise indicated.



At Christmas 1999, I woke up in the Istrian hills near the end of an overnight journey from Munich and looked out at what I thought were ruins of the Yugoslav wars. In the early morning light, silhouettes of concrete block houses slowly took form through the smeared bus windows. Some were a single storey, the roof being a layer of concrete that would some day become the base of a second floor. Others had standard A-line roofs in fired clay tiles, but were missing doors, windows, and internal walls. None were rendered. Sleepy and over-imaginative, I thought the ghostly structures were war ruins in various states of rebuild and repair. As I later learned, Istria never saw any fighting. What I had seen was indicative of a building culture prevalent in the countryside all over the former Yugoslavia (and elsewhere in eastern Europe), in which people construct houses over years and even decades, making additions when they have the money for materials. As an allegory for academic research, I think of my desire to see war ruins in half-built houses as proof that if you screw your eyes hard enough, you'll see almost anything. But it's easy to mistake windmills for giants. As Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle maintain, in a "playground of speculative strategies . . . the beholder defines the ruin," and as such, the beheld risks saying "more about the beholder than about the ruin or its individual environment."<sup>3</sup> Ruins are the ultimate exercise in polysemy—signifier and signified often float free.

Taking the ferry from the port city of Rijeka south to Split, I missed the devastation one still sees on any overland trip through the Dinaric hinterlands

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, "Introduction," in *Ruins of Modernity*, eds. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

known as the Krajina—literally “Borderland.”<sup>4</sup> In Dalmatia I made a perfunctory visit to Diocletian’s Palace in Split, and although I walked the ancient walls of Dubrovnik with all the other tourists, in my early twenties I had no particular yearning for Roman or Venetian ruins.<sup>5</sup> Having grown up in a “lucky country” and in a generation, which, like that of my father, had never known war, I felt there must be something valuable to learn from spending time in post-war former Yugoslavia. This had a lot to do with, in Susan Sontag’s phrase, “regarding the pain of others,”<sup>6</sup> or as Christopher Hitchens more misanthropically put it, “the languid contemplation of the miseries of others.”<sup>7</sup>

In Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the former frontline and on the eastern (Muslim) side of the city, I found the many of horror I had been looking for. The black and white photos I took with my father’s old Pentax camera, of streets of shelled and sundered buildings, and graveyards full of white Muslim headstones marking the graves of young men whose birthdates were similar to my own, remain the ruin images with which I remember the city. A character in Ugrešić’s novel *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* (*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*) states

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<sup>4</sup> In the time of the Ottomans the region was thought of as the *Antemurale Christianitatis* (“ramparts of Christendom”) and largely settled and inhabited by Serbs. In the summer of 1991 their descendents declared the rebel *Republika Srpska Krajina* (“the Serb Republic of Krajina”), and four years later, in the summer of 1995, they fled in their hundreds of thousands when the area fell to the Croatian Army. The exodus, estimated at 250,000, was the largest single movement of a European ethnic group since the exodus of the Germans from Silesia, the Sudetenland, and East Prussia following the Second World War. In April 2011 two Croatian generals, Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač, were sentenced to lengthy prison terms at the Hague-based International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for war crimes and their part in what the court called “a joint criminal enterprise” to permanently cleanse the Krajina of its Serbian population.

<sup>5</sup> At the time (Christmas 1999), the city of Dubrovnik had a number of plaques and maps pointing out buildings that had suffered damage from the Serbian and Montenegrin bombardment in 1991. To the best of my recollection almost all of these buildings had already been repaired.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *The Quotable Hitchens: From Alcohol to Zionism*, ed. Windsor Mann (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2011), x.

that “[l]ife is nothing other than a photograph album. Only what is in the album exists. What is not in the album, never happened.”<sup>8</sup> Yet while the ruin images of East Mostar and those I photographed later that summer among the detonated hamlets of eastern Bosnia are permanent exhibits in my internal ruin repository, other ruin images of postcommunist Europe have long since become jumbled with them. Some I have seen with my own eyes—the ghost town of Eisenhüttenstadt in the former East Germany; the poured concrete shells of never-to-be-finished apartment towers in Durres, Vlore, and Saranda, which blight the otherwise primeval Albanian coastline<sup>9</sup>—while others come from literature and film: the ruins of the Soviet naval base in Lukas Moodysson’s *Lilja 4-ever* where Lilja and Volodja sniff glue; the emptied gothic-like villages in Volker Koepp’s documentaries on everyday life in rural Brandenburg, Masuria, and the Baltic regions of Kaliningrad, the Memell Territory, and the Curonian Split.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth (London: Phoenix House, 1998), 27. First published as *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* (Zagreb: Konzor; Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2002). Croatian: “Život i nije drugo do album s fotografijama. Samo to što je u albumu postoji. To čega u albumu nema, nikada nije ni postojalo” (42).

<sup>9</sup> Long after my visit to Albania and some time after having written the above passage, I came across the following description of the same scene in Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk’s 2004 travelogue *Jadąc do Babadag* (*On the Road to Babadag*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011): “Then I saw Saranda. It began suddenly, without warning. On the bare slopes, the skeletons of houses appeared. From a distance you’d think there had been a fire, but these buildings were unfinished. Darker than the mountains but as mineral, as if baked in a great oven and stripped bare by fire of everything that might suggest a home. Deep in the bay, the city thickened a little, gleamed with glass, turned green, but we sailed on, to reach the shore. A rusted crane stood in a cement square. Over a gray barrack fluttered the two-headed Albanian eagle and the blue flag of the EU . . . On the hill above the port stood apartment blocks of rust-red concrete. But for the clothes drying on lines and the satellite dishes, they looked abandoned.

“Yes, everyone should come here. At least those who make use of the name Europe. It should be an initiation ceremony, because Albania is the unconscious of the continent. Yes, the European id, the fear that at night haunts slumbering Paris, London, and Frankfurt am Main. Albania is the dark well into which those who believe everything has been settled once and for all should peer” (93).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Kurische Nehrung* (2001), *Uckermark* (2002), *Schattenland* (2005), *Pommerland* (2005), *Holunderblüte* (2007), and *Memelland* (2008).

Those who lived through the end of communism and currently live in a never-ending “transition” (“an improvised waiting room . . . for many an exceptionally exciting time of (criminal) freedom”<sup>11</sup>) will have their own site-specific natural histories of ruins, generationally and socially defined. Some former East Berliners might think of the demolished Palace of the Republic; others might still see beneath the freshly-renovated facades of Prenzlauer Berg. Croats might think of the ruins of Vukovar, Serbs of the 1999 NATO bombing. Most Ukrainians probably register the ghost town of Prypiat, once home to Chernobyl workers. Chechnyans will certainly remember the two brutal destructions of Grozny (the first by Yeltsin, the second by Putin), Russians the tragic sinking of the *Kursk*. On an everyday basis, residents of any east European capital with at least a tourist trickle are involuntary witnesses to the nostalgia industry’s repackaging of Cold War paraphernalia, from gas masks to war medals. Postcommunist eastern Europe has no shortage of ruins—or absences where ruins once stood.

## 1.2 Beginnings (2)

In another of her essay collections, Ugrešić writes of the many foreigners who during the wars in the former Yugoslavia boasted of reading books by Ivo Andrić and Miroslav Krleža “[t]o better understand the Balkan frame of mind.”<sup>12</sup> Ugrešić’s objection is that this reduces Andrić and Krleža’s work to “tourist-

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<sup>11</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth (London, Phoenix House, 1998), 271. First published as *Kultura laži: Antipolitički eseji* (Zagreb: Arkzin, 1996; Zagreb: Konzor; Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2002); all Croatian page numbers refer to the 2002 edition. Croatian: “improviziran[a] čekaonic[a] . . . za mnoge uzbudljivo vrijeme (kriminalne) slobode” (331).

<sup>12</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Nobody’s Home*, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać (Rochester, NY: Open Letter Books, 2008), 160. First published as *Nikog nema doma* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2005). The cited passage is an extension of the essay “Književna geopolitika” (“Literary Geopolitics”) and thus does not appear in the originally published Croatian version of the essay.

spiritual guides,”<sup>13</sup> a task that would never be assigned to a Günter Grass or Philip Roth vis-à-vis their homelands. While the literary geopolitics are a matter for later attention, presently I need to confess that alongside Andrić’s books (Krlježa I discovered much later), Ugrešić’s essay collection *Kultura laži* (*The Culture of Lies*) and aforementioned novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* functioned as my guides through the post-Yugoslav and postcommunist ruins. In fact, it was my attachment to Ugrešić’s writings that prematurely ended a teaching engagement at the University of East Sarajevo.<sup>14</sup> I was relieved of my duties after giving a composition class excerpts from an essay entitled “Balkan Blues,” which contained unflattering associations between the war criminal Radovan Karadžić, the *gusle*,<sup>15</sup> the Bosnian Serb siege of Sarajevo, and the Serbian ring dance—the *kolo*. Completing a study of this nature on Ugrešić over a decade later has brought the *kolo* full circle.

The penultimate chapter of the English edition of *The Culture of Lies* is entitled “In Ruins,” and begins with a prefatory citation from Vlado Mrkić’s *Nikad više zajedno* (Never again together, 1993): “What are you guarding?’ I ask the guard. ‘Nothing. Ruins.’”<sup>16</sup> In the chapter’s final essay Ugrešić (or at least the essay’s narrator) describes herself as a “*Trümmerfrau, a sub-tenant, a bastard, a nomad, a Wossie*,”<sup>17</sup> and names an emerging group of postcommunist Europeans as

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> At the time (2000-01) it was called the University of Serb Sarajevo. On the orders of Bosnia’s international administration, the name was changed to the University of East Sarajevo in 2005 when all ethnically-titular geographic and institutional names that had sprung up during the war and the years following were required to be replaced with non-ethnic markers.

<sup>15</sup> A traditional single-stringed instrument used to accompany South Slavic epic poetry.

<sup>16</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 203. The final chapter of the 2002 Croatian edition is also called “In Ruins” (“U ruševinama”), but the Mrkić citation is gone.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 251. In the equivalent passage in the 2002 Croatian edition (311) Ugrešić refers to herself only as a bastard and wossie, but not as a *Trümmerfrau*, sub-tenant, or nomad.

*Trümmerleute* (“people of the ruins”):

[T]he *stateless, nomads, bastards, wossies* . . . Those who unite in themselves the traumatic *Wessie* and *Ossie* genes. They do not respect their forebears. They belong to a new tribe of people of *no fixed abode*. They feel most natural in an aeroplane. They are hard to recognise because they are good at mimicry. Their skill is the skill of *humiliation*, their achievement is mental, personal freedom. If nothing else, they have won the freedom not to blame anyone for their own loss. Mutants have sharpened sight and hearing. They are sceptical, deprived of rights, they possess nothing, they are *sub-tenants*. They are *Trümmerleute*, people who mentally clear up the ruins, because they have emerged from ruins, people who can therefore build a new idea about life, a new morality. In their former lives they had a chance to test available ideas about good: they had a home, and a homeland, and a nation, and a community, and successful careers. Today nothing can be taken from them, because they have nothing. Little can be given to them, because they once had everything. That fact gives them a kind of advantage. They do not consider Europe a privilege. Their privilege is the loss of illusions. Europe is for them a temporary place of residence, the choice of country is most often random. Let us not forget, they belong to the countless *race of sub-tenants*.<sup>18</sup>

These *Trümmerleute* are given fictional flesh as a disparate group of young ex-Yugoslavs in Ugrešić’s 2004 novel *Ministarstvo boli* (*The Ministry of Pain*), and yet other postcommunist *Trümmerleute* are scattered throughout her post-Yugoslav writings: asylum seekers and refugees; the unemployed and “surplus”; the elderly and exhausted; the young and irretrievably lost. Writing of post-

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 250. Original: “Zanimaju nas međutim, oni treći: apatridi, *nomadi, bastardi, wossies* . . . Ti koji ujediniuju u sebi traumatične *Wessie* i *Ossie* gene. Pripadaju novom plemenu ljudi *bez stalne adrese*. Najprirodnije se osjećaju u avionu. Teško se raspoznaju jer se lako mimikriraju. Njihov je nauk—nauk *poniženja*, njihovo dostignuće je sloboda da za vlastito gubitništvo ne okrivljuju nikoga. Mutanti imaju izoštriji vid i sluh. Skeptici su, lišeni su prava, neposjeduju ništa, *podstanari* su. Oni su *Trümmerleute*, ljudi koji mentalno raščičavaju ruševine, jer su iz ruševina izašli, ljudi koji pritom možda grade neku novu ideju o životu, neku novu moralnost. U bivšim životima imali su prilike da testiraju raspoložive ideje o dobru: imali su i dom, i domovinu, i naciju, i kolektiv, i uspješne karijere. Danas im se ništa ne može oduzeti, jer ništa nemaju. Malo što im se može dati, jer su sve već jednom imali. Ta činjenica daje im neku vrstu prednosti. Evropu ne smatraju privilegijom. Njihova je privilegija gubitak iluzija, a Evropa tek privremeno mjesto stanovanja, izbor zemalja najčešće je slučajan. Ne zaboravimo, oni su od milijunske rase *podstanara*” (311).

revolutionary Moscow in 1927, Walter Benjamin wrote that beggars were “dependable, remaining unchanged in their place, while everything around them shifts.”<sup>19</sup> Ugrešić’s *Trümmerleute* have the same function in “post-revolutionary” eastern Europe, embarrassing blemishes on the happiness of the revolutions of 1989.

Ruins as *topoi* and *loci* are central to Ugrešić’s post-Yugoslav writings. Whether sifting through the violent ruins of the former Yugoslavia, the architectural violence of transition in Bulgarian seaside resorts, or the flea markets of post-*Wende* Berlin, her first-person narrators are metaphorical *Trümmerfrauen*, their eyes fixed not towards the future, but on the past, the ruins of futures that never came to be. Ruins are constantly evoked in post-1989 east European prose. Jana Hensel’s *Zonenkinder* (literally, “Children of the Zone”), a memoir of East German coming-of-age in reunified Germany, tellingly begins with the emblematic citation, “Wir hatten Sex in den Trümmern und träumten / Wir fanden uns ganz schön bedeutend” (“We had sex in the ruins and dreamed / We thought ourselves so beautifully grand”).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Moscow,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 107.

<sup>20</sup> From the song *Trrrrmer* by Hamburg band Die Sterne; quoted in Jana Hensel, *Zonenkinder* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002), n.p.; translated by Jefferson Chase as *After the Wall* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). The translation by Chase is problematic and therefore this and all further translations from the book are my own. For a comprehensive critique of the translation see Debbie Pinfold, “‘Erinnerung ideologisch entschlacken’ or Lost in Translation: Reflections on Jana Hensel’s *Zonenkinder* and its American Translation,” *German Life and Letters* 60, no. 1 (2007): 133-148. In Germany *Zonenkinder* has sold over 350,000 copies and was the subject of a collection of essays entitled *Die Zonenkinder und Wir: Die Geschichte eines Phänomens*, ed. Tom Kraushaar (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2004).

### 1.3 Beginnings (3)

Visiting Sarajevo in the winter of 2007, I came across the Croatian translation of a short 2004 essay collection by Slovenian dramatist and novelist Drago Jančar. In the title essay, “A Joke, Irony, and Deeper Meaning” (in Slovenian, “Šala, ironija in globlji pomen”), Jančar maintains that east European writers, as witnesses to not only the bombed-out cities of what was once Yugoslavia, but also to “the ruins of the entire world in which we had lived,”<sup>21</sup> have post-1989 seen and written of what Europe today would as soon as possible rather forget. For this reason, Jančar suggests, the “literature of the ‘east European ruins,’”<sup>22</sup> as he calls it, has not stood a chance either at home or abroad. Jančar’s idea is grounded in Heinrich Böll’s programmatic 1952 essay “Bekanntnis zur Trümmerliteratur” (“Commitment to a Literature of the Ruins”), in which Böll writes of his generation’s attempts to represent the ruins of post-war Germany in literature. In Böll’s terms, their task was to write of people who lived in real and symbolic ruins, of refugees and the displaced, of all those who—like Böll and many of his writerly contemporaries—had returned home from a war nobody believed would ever end. And here we might remember the memorable title of Alexei Yurchak’s monograph *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*,<sup>23</sup> a phrase used to describe the way many Soviet citizens are said to have felt about communism and its sudden end.

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<sup>21</sup> Drago Jančar, *Šala, ironija i dublje značenje*, trans. Neda Fanuko and Jagna Pogačnik (Zagreb: Meandar, 2006); originally published as *Šala, ironija in globlji pomen* (Ljubljana: Nova revija, 2004). Croatian: “ruševine cijeloga svijeta u kojem smo živjeli” (22).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “književnost ‘istočnoeuropskih ruševina.’”

<sup>23</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).



Christened by critics with the epithets *Kriegsliteratur* (“war literature”), *Heimkehrerliteratur* (“returnees’ literature”), or most commonly, *Trümmerliteratur* (literally, “rubble literature,” but more commonly, “literature of the ruins”), Böll embraced the intended insults.<sup>24</sup> He puts it starkly: “The terms as such are correct: there had been six years of war, we returned home from the war and found ruins, and this is what we wrote about.”<sup>25</sup> While Böll and his literary generation were not held responsible for the war and its wreckage, held against them was that they wrote of what they saw: men, women, and children sick and injured, of blackmarketeers and their victims, of graveyards and cities that resembled graveyards. Perhaps aware that, as Peter Weiss wrote, “the gods despise losers,”<sup>26</sup> Böll responded that if the *Odyssey*—the story of the Trojan war, the destruction of Troy, and Odysseus’ return home—was one of the founding European epics, then he and his generation had no reason to be ashamed of a literature of war, ruins, and return.

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<sup>24</sup> As Rentschler notes, an equivalent epithet—*Trümmerfilm*—was coined to refer to postwar German film, the DEFA-produced and Wolfgang Staudte-directed *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are Among Us*, 1946) being the classic example. Rentschler maintains that “the rubble film” was not actually a genre, but a series of films produced in the immediate aftermath of WWII that, using different narrative strategies and styles, dealt with post-war realities in very different ways. “Rubble films,” he suggests, “took stock of a shattered nation and registered a state of physical and psychological ruin” (“The Place of Rubble in the *Trümmerfilm*,” *Ruins of Modernity*, 419). In contrast to *Trümmerliteratur*, with its gaze fixed firmly towards the past, *Trümmerfilm* is generally future-orientated, “more concerned with moving forward than with looking back, with reconstructing the nation rather than reconsidering its past” (422). Like *Trümmerliteratur*, however, *Trümmerfilme* were met with widespread rejection by German audiences (Staudte’s film, seen by six million at home and also enjoying success abroad, was a significant exception) who were unwilling “to accept films that probed the aporias of their history” (420). Rentschler cites a January 1947 article in *Der Spiegel* which argued that daily life was grim enough and that the little German art being produced needed to provide respite from the bleakness, not confirmation of it.

<sup>25</sup> Heinrich Böll, “Bekanntnis zur Trümmerliteratur,” in *Erzählungen, Hörspiele, Aufsätze*, (Köln: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1961), 339-43. German: “Die Bezeichnungen als solche sind berechtigt: es war Krieg gewesen, sechs Jahre lang, wir kehrten heim aus diesem Krieg, wir fanden Trümmer und schrieben darüber” (339).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Christa Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms: Selected Writings, 1990-1994*, trans. Jan van Heurck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 32.

With the above in mind, this study's central concern is how Ugrešić's post-Yugoslav writings, as direct responses to the changes—in both literature and in life—brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia can be understood as a “literature of the ‘east European ruins.’” In offering comparisons to writings by a number of other east European writers, I am concomitantly interested in how Böll's thematic triptych of war, return, and ruins ricocheted down the almost half a century separating the end of fascism and the end of communism in Europe, to be reimagined and reframed in post-1989 writings. Moreover, in considering the changed role and reception of east European literature, both at home and abroad, and not least the “home” and “away” receptions of Ugrešić's work, my enquiry is likewise concerned with the reappearance of post-WWII disputes over mimesis and restoration—in both literature and life. Concentrating on the writings of Dubravka Ugrešić, I make the case for a literary-historical framework for what might tentatively be called *Trümmerliteratur Redux*—a concept suggesting both a literature of the post-1989 east European ruins—and the post-1989 ruins of east European literature.

#### **1.4 Ruinology and Ruinophilia**

Modern ruinophilia is inevitably traced back to the Renaissance and the revival of antiquity, to the Baroque, the upheavals of the French Revolution, and the nineteenth-century development of archaeology. Hell and Schönle suggest that it was during the Renaissance that “[w]hat we now call ruins began to be perceived and preserved as such . . . when the awareness of historical discontinuities and

the demise of ancient civilizations raised the status of traces of the past.”<sup>27</sup> In an essay of her own, Hell points to the eighteenth century, contending that the first excavations at Pompeii, a rediscovery of classical antiquity, led to the attendant “rediscovery” of ruins.<sup>28</sup> Svetlana Boym charts the changing value of the ruin throughout history: from the Baroque to the romantic age when “ruins radiated melancholy, mirroring the shattered soul of the poet and longing for harmonic wholeness,”<sup>29</sup> to modern ruins—palimpsestic city texts that remind us of recent violence, while also serving as harbingers of the future. Whatever the strict point in time that ruins were first seen as ruins, Jon Beasley-Murray clears one thing up: “There is no such thing as an ancient ruin, for the ruin is always a modern concept.”<sup>30</sup> Another thing is equally important: the modern fascination for ruins coincided with both the cult of melancholia<sup>31</sup> and the new diagnosis of nostalgia.<sup>32</sup> The three have formed an unshakeable union ever since.

In German the word for “ruin” is simply *Ruine*, while *Trümmer* is the literal equivalent of “rubble.” The difference is significant and brings us to an unusual translation problem. As Helmut Puff writes, rubble is an “unformed mass of debris . . . material without significance; it is matter destined to be removed. By contrast, the term ‘ruins’ evokes traditions, visual codes, and a wealth of significations.”<sup>33</sup> Puff’s point is a fair one and important to bear in mind. In support of his argument he cites a speech by Goebbels after the 1943 destruction

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<sup>27</sup> Hell and Schönle, “Introduction,” *Ruins of Modernity*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Hell, “Imperial Ruin Gazers, or Why Did Scipio Weep,” *Ruins of Modernity*, 172.

<sup>29</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 79.

<sup>30</sup> Jon Beasley-Murray, “Vilcashuamán: Telling Stories in Ruins,” *Ruins of Modernity*, 212.

<sup>31</sup> Exemplified by books such as Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and Thomas Wharton’s *The Pleasures of Melancholy* (1747).

<sup>32</sup> See Boym, *Nostalgia*, 3-19.

<sup>33</sup> Helmut Puff, “Ruins as Models: Displaying Destruction in Postwar Germany,” *Ruins of Modernity*, 254.

of Kassel in which Goebbels deliberately elides the distinction between rubble and ruins, evidence of wilful conceptual slippage between the two. Yet the standard translation of *Trümmerliteratur* in English is “the literature of the ruins,” which is surely motivated by the fact that Böll’s concept was not of a literature exclusively devoted to the micro-phenomena of rubble—although that was certainly important—but one that would address the psychological and moral “ruin” in which the German people found themselves. Moreover, when Andreas Huyssen suggests that “the catastrophes of the twentieth century have mainly left rubble behind rather than ruins in Piranesi’s sense, even if some of that rubble has lent itself quite well to beautifying representations,”<sup>34</sup> he inadvertently confirms that the difference between “rubble” as aesthetically meaningless and “ruins” as aesthetically meaningful is somewhat less clear-cut than Puff suggests. Andreas Schönle complicates things further, writing that “[r]uins are piles of rubble shaped in odd, partly fortuitous ways, possibly, albeit not necessarily, reminiscent of the former grandeur of the buildings they hail from.”<sup>35</sup>

Thinking about ruins over the centuries calls forth a never-ending cast of writers, artists, and thinkers fascinated by their creative potential: Byron’s contemplation of Venice in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*; Spengler and his apocalyptic vision of the decaying cities of the West; Benjamin with his musings on allegory and ruins<sup>36</sup>; Rose Macaulay and her “pleasure of ruins”; Albert Speer

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<sup>34</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “Authentic Ruins: Products of Modernity,” *Ruins of Modernity*, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Andreas Schönle, “Ruins and History: Observations on Russian Approaches to Destruction and Decay,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 4 (Winter, 2006): 649.

<sup>36</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osbourne (London: Verso, 1998), 178.

and *Ruinenwert* (“ruin value”)<sup>37</sup>; the manifold ruins in the fictions of W.G. Sebald. In the academic marketplace of ideas, ruinology and ruinophilia are presently in vogue. Boym observes that “[t]he early twenty-first century exhibits a strange ruinophilia, a fascination for ruins,”<sup>38</sup> one which Andreas Huyssen attributes to the “current privileging of memory and trauma both inside and outside the academy.”<sup>39</sup> Schönle puts it more bluntly: ruinology is “a booming discipline.”<sup>40</sup>

Ruins have indeed inspired much scholarly endeavour in recent years. In *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*,<sup>41</sup> Tim Edensor champions the industrial ruins of post-Thatcherite Britain as spaces of subversion and transgression, rearguard resistance to city planners’ and developers’ dreams of manicured CCTV-surveilled urban space.<sup>42</sup> Much of the Winter 2006 issue of the journal *Slavic Review* was devoted to a forum entitled “Ruins and Russian Culture,” with contributors writing on everything from Viktor Shklovsky’s musing that post-Revolution Petrograd was a city busy “transforming itself into an engraving by Piranesi,”<sup>43</sup> to crumbling *khrushchevki*—the Russian equivalent

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<sup>37</sup> As Hitler’s chief architect, Speer intended the ruins of the fascist architecture of the Third Reich to—in millenia to come—rival the ruins of ancient Greece and Rome. The *Ruinenwert* concept was based on building with stone rather than modern building materials such as steel girders, iron, and concrete, which in time would disintegrate into rusting heaps of anonymous and unromantic rubble. While Hitler was immediately supportive of the concept, he became particularly enthused following a visit to Mussolini in May 1938. Based on the Pergamon Altar, the Zeppelin Field in Nuremberg (featured in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens*) is Speer’s most famous work. Despite grand plans for the construction of Berlin as *Welthauptstadt Germania*, few of Speer’s planned buildings ever materialized.

<sup>38</sup> Svetlana Boym, “Ruins of the Avant-Garde: From Tatlin’s Tower to Paper Architecture,” *Ruins of Modernity*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “Authentic Ruins: Products of Modernity,” *Ruins of Modernity*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Andreas Schönle, “Ruins and History”: 650. Schönle’s forthcoming monograph entitled *Architecture of Oblivion: Ruins and Historical Consciousness in Modern Russia* appears to be his contribution to the booming discipline.

<sup>41</sup> Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> In this respect Owen Hatherley’s *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* (London: Verso, 2010) is also highly relevant.

<sup>43</sup> Polina Barskova, “Piranesi in Petrograd: Sources, Strategies, and Dilemmas in Modernist

of the East German *Plattenbau*.<sup>44</sup> Offering a direct contradiction to German art historian Horst Janson's 1935 assertion that "Amerika kennt keine Ruinen" ("America has no ruins"),<sup>45</sup> Nick Yablon's *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919*<sup>46</sup> is exemplary of a new interest in American ruins. This interest ranges from documentaries and coffee table books on "the fabulous ruins of Detroit"<sup>47</sup>—which simultaneously mourn and aestheticize the ruins of post-Fordist America—to fictional treatments of the destruction of the Twin Towers such as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*.<sup>48</sup> Last, but by no means least, Hell and Schönle's previously-cited edited volume *Ruins of Modernity* stretches the chronotope back to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and Tolstoy's writings on the 1812 Fire of Moscow, moves (*inter alia*) through post-war German *Trümmerfilm* and Cold War atomic test sites in Nevada, and pushes on towards the urban palimpsests of Mumbai and Johannesburg.

Introducing their volume, Hell and Schönle suggest that the ruin is a "uniquely flexible and productive trope," "an aesthetic and conceptual category [that] is uniquely ill-defined."<sup>49</sup> In apparent response, they pose a fascinating set of ontological questions. Where does the ruin start and end? Does rubble qualify as ruin? Is a ruin an object or a process? (On this score, Puff reminds us that the

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Depictions of the Ruins (1918-1921)," *Slavic Review* 65, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 695.

<sup>44</sup> Precast concrete apartment blocks built after the Second World War.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Puff, "Ruins as Models," 253.

<sup>46</sup> Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> The phrase belongs to amateur web archivist, Lowell Forest Boileau, see: [www.detroityes.com](http://www.detroityes.com). See also Michael Chanan and George Steinmetz's documentary *Detroit: Ruin of a City* (2005). For coffee table books, see Camilo Vergara's *American Ruins* (New York: Monacelli, 2003), and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's *The Ruins of Detroit* (New York: Steidl, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (New York: Scribner, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Hell and Schönle, "Introduction," 6.

Latin word *ruina* means “a collapse, or rather a collapsing—that is, a process,”<sup>50</sup> yet the definition of a Latin signifier far from ends the argument.) Does the ruin signal the loss or endurance of the past? Is ruination the work of nature or human beings? Is the ruin a marker of nostalgia for a vanished past—or perhaps shame? While the present study at least partially addresses all of these questions, Hell and Schönle’s near-final question on whether “the aestheticization of the ruin belittle[s] the human suffering it connotes, pushing us into morally dubious territory” is perhaps the key one.<sup>51</sup> While not completely ignoring “people of the ruins,” ruinology, past and present, tends to look away from those who actually live in literal and symbolic ruins, let alone those whose lives—or very selves—are “in ruins.”

In one of the canonical texts of ruinology, Georg Simmel, writing just after the turn of the twentieth century, viewed the ruin exclusively in terms of architecture—“the only art in which the great struggle between the will of the spirit [for Simmel, the work of man] and the necessity of nature issues into real peace”<sup>52</sup>—a tendency that marks the vast majority of writings on ruins. Simmel maintains that as opposed to a damaged painting, chipped sculpture, or water-damaged text, each of which is “imperfect through the reductions it has undergone,” in the ruin of a building “other forces and forms, those of nature”

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<sup>50</sup> Puff, “Ruins as Models,” 295.

<sup>51</sup> Hell and Schönle, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>52</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Ruins,” trans. David Kettler, *The Hudson Review* 11, no. 3 (Autumn, 1958): 379. Having retreated to the Black Forest, Simmel died of liver cancer in 1918. How much he ever learned of the horrors of modern warfare and unprecedented destructive violence of the First World War is not known, but one wonders had he written “The Ruins” later—with this knowledge in mind—whether his entire disquisition might have taken a rather different turn.

grow to create “a new whole, a characteristic unity.”<sup>53</sup> Yet as Simmel observes, when we describe a person as a “ruin,” there is none of the same aesthetic satisfaction, because he or she lacks “that metaphysical claim which attaches to the decay of a material work as by virtue of a profound *a priori*.”<sup>54</sup>

The iconic remains of the Berlin Wall—the fall of which sets the temporal stage for this study—may well have represented, “‘The end of the European postwar era,’ ‘The end of the twentieth century,’ ‘The end of the modern age,’ ‘The end of the Cold War,’ ‘The end of ideologies,’ ‘The end of history,’”<sup>55</sup> as the anti-hero of Thomas Brussig’s *Heroes Like Us* ironically mocks the political commentariat. Yet as a citizen of besieged Sarajevo stated, while the fall of the Wall might have been a good thing, it “‘crumbled down upon our heads.’”<sup>56</sup> The dizzying images of euphoric East Germans pouring into West Berlin on the night of November 9, 1989, some of whom immediately set about turning the Wall into a ruin, speak, perhaps, for the hopes and aspirations for a new life with freedom of movement, respect for human rights, and, it must be said, material improvement. Yet as Hell and Schönle point out, very little time passed before many East Germans came to see the fall of the Wall as an “unfriendly imperial takeover that resulted in the devaluation of their lives. Ruins produce more ruins.”<sup>57</sup> In 1989, communism may have been water over the dam, but it left behind generations of east Europeans whose defining human experiences were now located in a world that

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Brussig, *Heroes Like Us*, trans. John Brownjohn (London: Harvill, 1997), 5.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Igor Štiks, “‘The Berlin Wall Crumbled Down upon Our Heads!’: 1989 and Violence in the Former Socialist Multinational Federations,” *Global Society* 24, no. 1 (2010): 92. In the prefatory note to Ugrešić’s *Nobody’s Home* an “anonymous commentator” makes an almost identical statement.

<sup>57</sup> Hell and Schönle, “Introduction,” 3.



was gone. Infused with compassion and melancholic doubt, Dubravka Ugrešić's post-Yugoslav writings articulate the experience of these generations of east Europeans who in the "afterlife" were outflanked by history: those whose limited options in the new Europe have been metaphorically akin to either "shoot(ing) their way through the gray economy, or mak(ing) twenty dollars a month driving a bus in Dnepropetrovsk."<sup>58</sup>

### 1.5 Postcommunist Ruins: Agency and Aesthetics

This dialectic between the artifact and the absent agent suggests that any narrowly aesthetic contemplation of the ruined site, any exclusive focus on the decaying building, misses the larger event that the ruin marks: the destruction of the whole civilization that erected the edifice and then failed to protect it, leaving us to contemplate the burned walls, tumbled pillars, or collapsed roof. The contemplative stance therefore avoids the question of agency and guilt, opting instead for the comfortable aesthetic pleasure that the view of destruction affords. Facing one dead body, we might call the police and peek out the window with voyeuristic curiosity. Facing signs of a dead civilization, we fall into a sublime melancholy that precludes our posing the question of justice: who did this deed, who undid this world? This is the inquiry regularly repressed by the aesthetic vision that reifies the ruin into an allegory of decay as such.<sup>59</sup>

Although "dead civilization" might be a slightly melodramatic formulation vis-à-vis the end of communism in Europe, the above quotation nevertheless perfectly captures one of the chief dilemmas of writing about postcommunist ruins. It appears that the only way to avoid "comfortable aesthetic pleasure" or falling into "sublime melancholy" is to assign agency and blame, to proffer names of those responsible for the collapse of communism and the messy and often

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<sup>58</sup> Gary Shteyngart, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (New York: Riverhead, 2003), 407.

<sup>59</sup> Russell A. Berman, "Democratic Destruction: Ruins and Emancipation in the American Tradition," *Ruins of Modernity*, 106.

violent upheavals that ensued. However, a primarily literary study such as this seems a poor place from which to enter the interminable fracas on (false) equivalencies between Stalinism and Nazism, communism and fascism, and socialism and capitalism. Given the explicit melancholic and nostalgic auras that engulf ruins of any kind, any study of postcommunist ruins is perhaps *a priori* doomed to either be or be seen as a kind of *linke Trauerarbeit* (“leftwing melancholia”),<sup>60</sup> a failed mourning for a vanished world. Yet ruins, like history, are always dialectical. In the winter of 2010, wandering around the Soviet War Memorial in Berlin’s Treptower Park, I felt genuinely overwhelmed at the thought of the estimated 80,000 Soviet soldiers who gave their lives in the Battle of Berlin. But on the bike ride home I couldn’t help thinking about the similar number of Berlin women raped by Red Army troops on the city’s fall.<sup>61</sup>

Since Herodotus, ruins have been recorded as relics of the ends of empires,<sup>62</sup> yet whether the fall of one *ancien régime* and the rising of a new one on its ruins is to be mourned as painful death, or celebrated as resurrection, is, as in all things connected with ruins, dependent on the gazer. Whatever the honour of the promise of workers of the world uniting, of slogans such as *Junkerland in Bauernhand* (“noble lands in peasant hands”) or *bratstvo i jedinstvo* (“brotherhood and unity”), communism engendered its own doom. And the doom was there from the very beginning: in the Red Terror, the Great Purge, and

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<sup>60</sup> See Helmut Dubiel, “Linke Trauerarbeit,” *Merkur: Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken* 496, no. 6 (June 1990): 482-91.

<sup>61</sup> Although fiercely disputed in Russia, Anthony Beevor’s *Berlin: The Downfall 1945* (London: Viking, 2002) is the authoritative source on the subject.

<sup>62</sup> The two eminent references here are Gibbon’s six volume *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published between 1776-88, and de Volney’s 1791 essay “Les Ruines, ou méditations sur les révolutions des empires” (“The Ruins, or Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires”).

the Gulag; in the basements of Lubyanka and Hohenschönhausen, and on the rock of Goli otok; in the crimes of the KGB, the Stasi, and the UDBA; in the erection of absurdities such as the “Anti-Fascist Protection Barrier” (in German *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall*, i.e. the Berlin Wall), or monstrous failures such as Chernobyl. Communism “ruined” itself in the events of Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Prague 1968, and Poland 1981; in Ceaușescu’s megalomaniac construction projects and disastrous contraceptive policies; and in the pervasive hypocrisy of some being more equal than others. The indictment is open-ended and the litany hopelessly incomplete.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, communism was not only morally collapsing from the outset, but also materially. As Thomas Lahusen has argued, in many cases poverty meant that “built socialism was decaying, or, if you wish, ‘in ruins,’ from the very beginning of its existence. As for the people, they endured.”<sup>64</sup> And they endured in *Einstürzende Neubauten*<sup>65</sup>—collapsing new buildings.<sup>66</sup>

Yet is that all there is to say about communism? That it was a monstrous moral and material failure? In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* Kundera writes that when the communists came to power in post-war Czechoslovakia, the half of the population which cheered them along, “was the more dynamic, the more

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<sup>63</sup> It goes without saying that one could just as easily formulate a similar indictment with respect to the crimes of capitalism, starting with colonialism and slavery, and taking in everything from German Fascism to American sponsoring of military dictatorships in South America, to the amoral voraciousness of global financial markets and the individuals and corporations that propel them.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Lahusen, “Decay or Endurance? The Ruins of Socialism,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 4 (Winter, 2006): 746.

<sup>65</sup> Also the name of a West Berlin art-rock band.

<sup>66</sup> In the Soviet context Lahusen cites a study showing that a “constant lack of high-quality materials, industrial technology, and skilled laborers . . . caused many projects to fail even before their completion. The best metal was used to build machinery and industrial tools, the best cement to construct dams. Housing units were built using the leftovers” (“Decay or Endurance?” 746). Slavenka Drakulić makes a similar point with regard to construction in the former Yugoslavia in the essay “Still Stuck in the Mud” from *Café Europa* (London: Abacus, 1996).

intelligent, the better half.”<sup>67</sup> And in the lexicon that concludes *The Culture of Lies*, Ugrešić defines communism as the “most stigmatised set of ideas and ideological practice, which today serves as an enormous laundromat for cleaning dirty washing,”<sup>68</sup> a stigmatisation that allows the global plunder of eastern Europe to go unpunished, as it is only “communist stuff” that is being plundered. As Ugrešić suggests in another essay collection, this stigmatisation has meant that “[a] whole culture vanished before it managed to be properly reevaluated.”<sup>69</sup> In the Croatian context, she maintains that the “catastrophic fall of communist shares on the world market of political ideologies [has] forced Croatia into total denial of its communist past.”<sup>70</sup> To make matters worse, given the association of the Yugoslav collapse with the fall of another “unsustainable” federation, the Soviet Union, the denial of this past has enjoyed the blessing of the West.<sup>71</sup> The final consequence of all of this is that “[t]oday, among the ruins of utopian systems (above all communism) . . . the future seems to have disappeared somewhere. Especially the ‘bright future,’ the one that is now resting peacefully in the lexicon of communist ideas.”<sup>72</sup>

Reducing communism to simple moral and material failure is both to risk drawing applause from the wrong side (from the promoters of enforced amnesia

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<sup>67</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Penguin, 1983), 8.

<sup>68</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 270. Croatian: “Komunizam je najstigmatiziraniji set ideja i idejne prakse koji danas služi kao golema praonica za pranje prljavog veša” (331).

<sup>69</sup> See Ugrešić, *Thank You For Not Reading*, 179. Croatian: “Cijela jedna kultura nestala je prije nego što je stigla biti prevrednovana” (210).

<sup>70</sup> Ugrešić, *Nobody’s Home*, 269. Croatian: “Katastrofalni pad komunističkih dionica na svjetskoj burzi političkih ideologija otjerao je Hrvatsku u totalno poricanje svoje komunističke prošlosti” (241).

<sup>71</sup> See Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 247. (*Kultura laži*, 308)

<sup>72</sup> Ugrešić, *Thank You For Not Reading*, 199. Croatian: “Danas, kada bauljamo među ruševinama utopijskih sistema (komunističkog, prije svega) . . . budućnost kao da je nekamo iščezla. Osobito ‘svijetla budućnost,’ ta koja danas miruje u leksikonu ideja komunizma” (232).

and the relentless logic of capitalism), and to inadvertently support what the late Christa Wolf called “the ban on utopia.”<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, offering a defence—even a nuanced one—appears to both insult its millions of victims and slander the popular revolutions that led to its downfall. Indeed, this thorny dialectic leaves us with a substantial dilemma in terms of our aesthetic responses and readings of postcommunist ruins, a dilemma magnified by their representation in literature, film, and other arts.

Several years after the fall of Wall, the Berlin narrator of Ugrešić’s *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* describes a performance of Ilya Kabakov’s *You’ve got something boiling Ol’ga Georgievna* as “a requiem for a vanished epoch, its sad resumé, the very heart of the system,”<sup>74</sup> which, regardless of the fact that communal kitchens were never a part of the Yugoslav experience of communism, pulls the thread of an “undefined sadness . . . of a shared ‘East European trauma.’”<sup>75</sup> The performance, recalled three years later, is undoubtedly an aesthetic experience—the pleasure of the fall—and the very same experience we have sitting in a favourite café, coffee in hand, reading the novel. It is the experience we have watching a film as devastating as Jasmila Žbanić’s *Grbavica* (2006) in a boutique cinema, showered and blazered, self-congratulatory for being receptive to such brutal subject matter, and of course, our ability to be profoundly moved by it. As Schönle contends, “[r]epresentation functions as filter” and there is “a profound ambivalence between aesthetics and history in

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<sup>73</sup> Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, 39.

<sup>74</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 42. Croatian: “rekvijem za iščezlu epohu, njezin tužni rezime, samo srce sistema” (58). This passage first appeared in *The Culture of Lies* (174; *Kultura laži*, 223-24).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* Croatian: “neke nejasne nesreće, neke opće istočnoevropske traume.”

the uses of ruins.”<sup>76</sup> Writing of the “re-aestheticization of cataclysm” and “the commercial exploitation of Armageddon for entertainment purposes” made possible by “the viewer’s distance from the human dimension of the tragedy,”<sup>77</sup> Schönle implicitly indicts mass culture. The difficulty, however, is that although their motives may not be commercial or exploitative, sensitive and compassionate literary, cinematic, and artistic representations of ruins have the same—if not heightened—aesthetic qualities. As Sontag writes:

There is beauty in ruins. To acknowledge the beauty of photographs of the World Trade Center ruins in the months following the attack seemed frivolous, sacrilegious. The most people dared say was that the photographs were “surreal,” a hectic euphemism behind which the disgraced notion of beauty cowered. But they *were* beautiful, many of them—by veteran photographers such as Gilles Peress, Susan Meiselas, and Joel Meyerowitz, among others. The site itself, the mass graveyard that had received the name “Ground Zero,” was of course anything but beautiful. Photographs tend to transform, whatever their subject; and as an image something may be beautiful—or terrifying, or unbearable, or quite bearable—as it is not in real life.<sup>78</sup>

Although Sontag makes her point with regard to photography, all artistic representations boast this same transformative power. It is what we might call “a structural error.” As such, the *aporia* of (inadvertently) taking pleasure in the “languid contemplation of the miseries of others” (c.f. Hitchens) appears an impasse. Ugrešić’s “fictional” depictions of Berlin flea markets and ragged vendors selling other people’s old photo albums are tremendously evocative of transience, postmodern recycling, and the strange commerce of nostalgia, yet walking through the same scenes in real life in the winter of 2010 was simply

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<sup>76</sup> Schönle, “Ruins and History,” 651.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 76.

unsettling: why do young tourists want to hang scavenged yellowed photos of anonymous (dead) Germans on their walls? (And isn't that a kind of theft?) Thus, when W.G. Sebald in one of the seminal works of recent ruinology crankily intones that "the construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world is a process depriving literature of its right to exist,"<sup>79</sup> he seems to forget that aesthetic affect is as much a product of the reader's as the writer's imagination, and that the filters of representation inevitably aestheticize.

Boym suggests that "[r]uins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place, tantalizing us with utopian dreams of escaping the irreversibility of time,"<sup>80</sup> and Huyssen asserts that "an imaginary of ruins is central for any theory of modernity that wants to be more than the triumphalism of progress and democraticization, or the longing for past greatness."<sup>81</sup> Schönle's version is that "[a]s residues of the past that have been rejected or by-products of economic progress, ruins can become the site of a critique of the ideology of progress, of the ever-more-stringent forward movement of history."<sup>82</sup> All of these claims have merits and implicitly suggest that to "rescue" ruins discourse (from thorny questions of agency and unwitting aestheticization) one must co-opt ruins as critiques of modernity and progress. There is no question that the ruins in the post-1989 writings of Ugrešić and others can be interpreted as

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<sup>79</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Towards a Natural History of Destruction: With Essays on Alfred Andersch, Jean Améry, and Peter Weiss*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003), 53. Rentschler notes that particularly from the 1960s onwards, many commentators began issuing similar criticisms of *Trümmerfilm*, that it "aestheticized the aftermath of aerial attacks instead of carefully registering 'the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself.'" ("*Trümmerfilm*," 422)

<sup>80</sup> Boym, "Ruins of the Avant-garde," 58.

<sup>81</sup> Huyssen, "Authentic Ruins," 22.

<sup>82</sup> Schönle, "Ruins and History": 653.

powerful critiques of the euphoric political rhetoric of “the reunification of Europe,” of *belles paroles* such as “Europe without borders” and “the family of European nations.” As representations of post-1989 East-West rapprochement these ruins strongly suggest that western Europe set about creating not the “common European home” envisioned by Gorbachev in the optimism of *Perestroika*, but the division of Europe into victors and vanquished, the replacement of the Iron Curtain with one sewn at Schengen.

The above notwithstanding, however, reading critiques of the realities of postcommunism as nostalgia for communism itself inexorably draws us into the tangles of what in German is known as *Ostalgie*, and the dilemma of for what, exactly, the Ostalgie is nostalgic. Reflecting on the mood of “nostalgia and mourning” in the former GDR in 1991, Huyssen insisted that mourning the loss of a former security is quite different from wanting the old system back. This nostalgia, he writes

is motivated by the wrenching experiences of massive unemployment and imminent poverty, of regulations and procedures that cover every single aspect of everyone’s everyday life. It is a nostalgia of despair, exacerbated by the fact that so many representatives of the old regime, whether in education, legal institutions, communal administration, or privatized business, have been able to hold on to positions of power and influence.<sup>83</sup>

With regard to *Jugonostalgija* (nostalgia for the former Yugoslavia), Ugrešić writes that “the culture of the everyday—and not a state or political system!—that is the source of Jugonostalgia, if such a thing exists today. Nostalgia belongs

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<sup>83</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “After the Wall,” in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 37-66 (47).



to the sphere of the heart.”<sup>84</sup> In reality, nostalgia for communism as a political system tends to be nurtured most by those who never lived through it the first time. As Boym contends, despite official euphoria, “the events in the East provoked almost displeasure . . . from the European left,” many of whom “equated the fall of the Berlin Wall with the fall of their last fantasies.”<sup>85</sup>

In the Translator’s Foreword to Christa Wolf’s essay collection *Parting from Phantoms*, Jan van Heurck writes that “[t]he disappearance of the GDR, whatever its flaws, meant the loss of another space where something different could have been tried in human history, where people could have experimented with their new insights like the citizens of the caves in Cassandra’s Troy just before it fell.”<sup>86</sup> For my part, in writing of representations of the ruins of the utopian project of communism in the post-1989 writings of Dubravka Ugrešić and others, I am extremely reluctant to enlist them in support of any new utopian project. Better, I think, is to remember Boym’s interpretation of Benjamin, that ruins are inherently dialectical, and that “[i]n them all the contradictions of the epochs of transition are frozen in a standstill dialectic; they are allegories of transient times.”<sup>87</sup> As the exemplary dialectical and polysemic figure, ruins in the

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<sup>84</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 133. Croatian: “kultura svakidašnjice (a ne država ili politički sistem) [je] izvor jugo-nostalgije, ako takvo što u ovom trenutku postoji. Nostalgija, naime, spada u resor srca” (175).

<sup>85</sup> Boym, *Nostalgia*, 226. Looking at it from the opposite perspective, Ugrešić suggests that “this same tinge of disappointment was felt by those who had nothing to do with communism, yet the communist world was the measure by which they gauged the levels of their own happiness. With communism vanished the screen onto which they could project their darkest fantasies. The sadist suddenly lost his favourite victim” (*Nobody’s Home*, 271.) Croatian: “Pretpostavljam da razočaranje osjećaju i oni koji s komunizmom nisu imali veze, ali je komunistički svijet bio ta mjera prema kojoj su mjerili vodostaj vlastite sreće. S komunizmom je nestalo polje za proiciranje mračnih fantazija: sadistu je odjednom izmakla njegova najdraža žrtva” (243).

<sup>86</sup> Jan van Heurck, introduction to Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, ix.

<sup>87</sup> Boym, *Nostalgia*, 208.

postcommunist context offer a critique of both the (communist-socialist) past and (democratic-capitalist) present.

Although the present study shares some common ground with postcolonial approaches, I am nevertheless wary of any tendency to exclusively blame Western *neocolonialism* in the post-Wall period for the very real disappointments of “the Changes.” For one, the thinking (or moreover, the *feeling*) that “it’s all the West’s fault” inevitably prompts the spectacular elision of the militarised Soviet colonisation of most of eastern Europe for the previous four and a half decades.<sup>88</sup> On this score I am again with Huyssen, who writes that “[t]he best way to guarantee the success of a conservative restoration . . . is to remain silent about leftist delusions and to cling to the comfort of the old *Feindbilder* (projected image of the enemy).”<sup>89</sup> I have little desire to turn the postcommunist ruins or “people of the ruins” into heroic figures of resistance to teleologies of progress—most of these people are too exhausted and too busy simply enduring. While the post-1989 writings of Ugrešić and others contain an undoubted political charge, it is quite another matter to construe them as deliberate political acts of “writing back,” a reading which would inevitably involve a neutering of their significant aesthetic qualities. The literature of the east European ruins is an elegiac one; the ruins and those who inhabit them *unconditionally* surrender to their fates.

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<sup>88</sup> As David Chioni Moore points out in a highly-influential article, “many postcolonialist scholars, in the United States and elsewhere, have been Marxist or strongly left and therefore have been reluctant to make the Soviet Union a French- or British-style villain.” See “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Postsoviet? Towards a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (January 2001): 117.

<sup>89</sup> Huyssen, “After the Wall,” 41.

## 1.6 Regarding the Pain of Others

At this point I need to make a start on the series of defensive caveats required by all scholarly endeavours in order to deflect the frequently disingenuous readings scholars enjoy habitually inflicting on one another. The first of these concerns refers to what is sometimes referred to as “positionality.”

Over the past two decades scholars such as Larry Wolff, Maria Todorova, Vesna Goldsworthy, David Norris, Andrew Hammond, Nataša Kovačević, and Zoran Milutinović have rigorously deconstructed the ongoing legacy of western knowledge production about eastern Europe and the Balkans.<sup>90</sup> In acknowledging this vein of postcolonial-influenced scholarship, not to mention Ugrešić’s own *Bedenken* on the terms of westerners’ engagement in the Yugoslav wars, anyone in my position—a western male knowledge-producer about the Balkans and eastern Europe—has to acknowledge the orientalism and worse of those who have gone before him (and it is indeed inevitably a “he”). Yet I wish to make a plea that things can also be different.

Firstly, however, and perhaps somewhat contrarily, I have to express a level of discomfort about the nature of “positionality” exercises, which often appear to require an *a priori* defence of (and indeed apology for) oneself and one’s work. In

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<sup>90</sup> See Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1998); David Norris, *In the Wake of the Balkan Myth: Questions of Identity and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Andrew Hammond, *The Debated Lands: British and American Representations of the Balkans* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007); Nataša Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe’s Borderline Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2008); and Zoran Milutinović, *Getting Over Europe: the Construction of Europe in Serbian Culture* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2011).

this sense, my concern is that the explicit ethical and moral demands of self-positioning exercises can end up an invitation to both narcissism<sup>91</sup> (a constant inserting of one's personal subjectivity into the work) and self-heroization (look how well aligned I am with the most progressive politics of the day!). Moreover, my anxiety is that self-positioning exercises not infrequently appear to have much more to do with jockeying for advantageous position within the global academy, and much less to do with the actual ideas presented in one's work. With these reservations in mind, the following reflections on my "positionality" are self-ironically aimed at my self-deheroization—self-irony and self-deheroization not coincidentally being two of the key attributes of Ugrešić's work. For all my reluctance, these reflections nevertheless allow me an elegant return to Sontag's ideas on "regarding the pain of others," and to consider some of Ugrešić's searing writings on westerners' involvement in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.<sup>92</sup>

To my parents, certainly, there will never be a good enough answer to the question of why, from New Zealand, I went to live in Bosnia in my early twenties. In the years I spent there and in Serbia (2000-4), the one I refined was that it had been a dark rainy night, and that I'd taken a wrong turn, and that as the sun rose the next morning I found myself in the mountains above Sarajevo. As this is an unsatisfactory explanation for present purposes, I'll try to do better: I went to Bosnia because of rock 'n' roll. I'm not embarrassed about that. Even Camus, a

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<sup>91</sup> As Ugrešić writes, narcissism is "undoubtedly the basic premise of any literary act, but ought not also to be its outcome." (*Have a Nice Day*, 12). Croatian: "sigurno temeljna pretpostavka svakog književnog čina, ali ne bi smio biti i njegovim rezultatom" (11).

<sup>92</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will restrict these reflections to my relationship with the former Yugoslavia. As will later become apparent, my relationship with "eastern Europe" follows a broadly similar pattern.

moralist if there ever was one, maintained that “the little moral philosophy I know I learned on the soccer pitch and the stage; those were my two real universities.”<sup>93</sup>

My childhood heroes were not Maxim Gorky or John Steinbeck, they were Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young. Literature only seemed a good idea when it had become clear that teenage dreams of crowded stadiums weren't coming through. My formative ethical *Bildung* didn't come from reading *Crime and Punishment*, *Germinal*, or *The Tin Drum*, but from Peter Gabriel singing for the memory of Steven Biko, police murdered in Port Elizabeth; from Bono torturedly whispering for the Argentinian *Mothers of the Disappeared*; from Midnight Oil in chorus singing (and Peter Garrett dancing wildly) for Aboriginal land rights in the Australian “Dead Heart”; and most of all, from Bruce Springsteen bawling *Born in the USA*, one of the greatest anti-war cries, and, incidentally, least understood songs of all time. The first time I really paid attention to the war in Bosnia was after hearing U2 and Pavarotti's song *Miss Sarajevo* and seeing the video's accompanying images of a (real) beauty pageant in the besieged city. (Yes, yes, few things make the orientalist's heart pump quicker than shimmering guitars, a soaring tenor bridge section in Italian, and images of beautiful women among the ruins.) At the time I was far from alone in getting it into my head that the Bosnian War was my generation's Spanish Civil War. The first time I visited Sarajevo a now good friend asked me if I felt like Hemingway. I took the bruise.

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<sup>93</sup> Quoted in David Bellos, introduction to Albert Camus, *The Plague, The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom, and Selected Essays* (New York: Knopf, 2004), ix.

I was almost 16 when the war in Bosnia began in April 1992, and 19 when it ended in early 1995. As noted earlier, I moved there in mid-2000 when offered a job teaching English at the University of East Sarajevo, which came about through Bosnians I had met while playing the piano at a hotel restaurant as an undergraduate student (of German and French) in my New Zealand hometown; the hotel owner was a Bosnian Serb. At the most banal, I took the job because I couldn't extend my German residence permit (after graduation I spent a year as a teaching assistant at a high school in Munich) and didn't want to go home. At the most noble, I took it out of guilt, out of a feeling of obligation to others born with less fortunate passports, those born casualties of what Michael Ondaatje once called "the sadness of geography."<sup>94</sup>

At least since her 1988 novel *Forsiranje romana-reke* (*Fording the Stream of Consciousness*) Ugrešić has sent barbs in the direction of people like me: the naïve, foreign romantic. In that novel a Russian character (a novelist) suggests that "western" Russian scholars are a bunch of frauds and academic tourists, the washed-up remnants of the intellectual left, only interested in vicariously importing others' suffering into their otherwise vacuous lives.<sup>95</sup> In her first (post-Yugoslav) essay collection, published in 1993, Ugrešić offered splenetic depictions of the contemporary American everyday, the essays' narratorial voice that of the east European refusenik who resents America and Americans their

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<sup>94</sup> Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 296.

<sup>95</sup> See Dubravka Ugrešić, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Virago, 1991), 47. First published as *Forsiranje romana-reke* (Zagreb: August Cesarec, 1988; Zagreb: Konzor; Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2001), 46; Croatian page numbers refer to the 2001 edition.

optimism and energy, their wishing each other a nice day, their psychiatrists to relieve every darkness.

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* Ugrešić offers a number of equally splenetic representations. The narrator introduces the “over-emotional Lucy Skrzydelko”<sup>96</sup> as an existentially-troubled borderline anoxeric, who resembles the heroine of *LA Law*. Lucy's personal dramas—an abusive ex-lover, a dysfunctional upbringing, and subsequent estrangement from her family—have apparently drawn her to the grand tragedy of the narrator's exilic fate. The encounter reads painfully as Ugrešić's indictment of westerners, who—oh-so-alienated, suffering from the unbearable lightness of their beings, and desperate to mitigate their self-obsession—magnify their personal dwarf dramas in order to appropriate and falsely identify with the very real historical pain of east Europeans. The narrator fires back in return:

Yes, she was on pills, she saw a therapist regularly . . . Why was I surprised, “therapist” is a holy American word. And she drank, sometimes she drank too much, it's true, but she didn't take drugs, and she could barely get by. Everyone was on something in this fucking country. The most powerful country in the world had the most fragile population, they were all falling apart, they were all in a state of permanent nervous breakdown. An infantile country, that's what it was, and they all needed a coach. A coach or a therapist, it didn't matter which.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 117-23. Croatian: “Suviše osjećanja Lucy Skrzydelko” (145-52).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 121. Croatian: “Da, na pilulama je, redovito posjećuje psihijatra. Ne čudim se valjda, therapist je sveta američka riječ. I pije, ponekad previše pije, istina je. Drogu nikad nije uzimala, i ovako jedva izlazi na kraj sa sobom. Svatko je na nečemu u ovoj jebenoj zemlji. Najmoćnija zemlja na svijetu, a ima najfragilniju populaciju, svi su u raspadu, svi su u nekoj vrsti permanentne konfesije. Infantilna zemlja, eto što je, svima treba coach. Coach ili therapist, svejedno” (149).

Tapping a not-unrelated vein, the narrator of *The Ministry of Pain* reports that

West European Slavists were wont to enter the field for emotional reasons: they had fallen in love with one of those exotic East bloc types. Or they would cement their choice of field after the fact with a politically, culturally, professionally, sentimentally correct marriage. There was another factor involved: the field made them absolute lords over minor, out-of-the-way, language-and-literature fiefdoms into which no one had ventured theretofore, which made the probability of their competence being adequately evaluated statistically insignificant.<sup>98</sup>

Later in the novel, the narrator depicts the western political, military, humanitarian, and intellectual elite as naked opportunists who looked to the wars in Croatia and Bosnia as a prime chance to climb the international hierarchy while indulging their respective saviour complexes.<sup>99</sup> Ugrešić also offers similar criticisms in multiple iterations in *The Culture of Lies*, the following passage exemplary:

European (and American) journalists, intellectuals, artists, analysts, thinkers, experts on countries in transition acquired with the war in Yugoslavia an opportunity once again to show off their colonial love, the love felt for a victim. They did not enter a dialogue with the victim (*What dialogue! The victim is by definition dumb!*), they confiscated its tongue (*The victim's role is to suffer, and not itself to articulate its misfortune*), they became its interpreters (*The language of the victim is in any case*

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<sup>98</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Ministry of Pain*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Saqi, 2005), 46; first published as *Ministarstvo boli* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2004). Croatian: "Naime, 'zapadnoevropski slavisti' često su odabirali slavističku struku iz emocionalnih razloga, zaljubivši se u 'Istočnjaka' ili 'Istočnjakinju'; ili su pak odabranu struku naknadno okrunili brakom iz te nerazdvojive mješavine kulturno-geografskih, strukovnih i ljubavnih računa. Privlačnost struke povećavala je činjenica da su bili apsolutni gospodari malih, zabačenih književno-jezičnih provincija u koje nitko nikada nije zalazio, pa je mogućnost provjere njihovih kompetencije bila statistički zanemariva" 57-8. Of importance here is that the narrator immediately goes on to state that she is in no position to judge, given that she owes her temporary lecturing job to a personal friendship with the wife of the head of department.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 158 (142).



*unusable in the codes of the Western market*), representatives of its misfortune for which they would, of course, take their percentage . . .<sup>100</sup>

Thinking about the cited passages, and particularly when I read over the passage immediately above, I wonder if I went to (post-war) Bosnia to show off my colonial love for a victim. After all, didn't I go to teach English, no less a colonial enterprise than that of my father, who at a similar age went to Fiji, the country of my birth, to work in a New Zealand bank? And I ask myself: did I ever really engage in a dialogue with my students, colleagues, and friends? Am I now confiscating their tongue, translating and coding their post-Yugoslav and east European misfortune for the (western) academic marketplace? And what of my percentage? Is the present study just another kind of "paper sword"? Am I one of the many "lovers of 'catastrophe tourism,' stray inquisitives, photographers and hunters of strong emotions"?<sup>101</sup> Was I drawn to Bosnia by the "spectacle of death"? Is this study just a way of accusing others of moral indifference and incompetence, while chalking up intellectual, professional, and moral points for myself?<sup>102</sup> Am I one of Ugrešić's "foreign colleagues"—"supporters of justice in other people's lands, intellectual fighters for the truth, intellectual

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 248. Croatian: "Evropski novinari, intelektualci, umjetnici, analitičari, mislioci, stručnjaci za zemlje u tranziciji dobili su s ratom u bivšoj Jugoslaviji priliku da još jednom performiraju svoju ljubav, ljubav prema žrtvi. Nisu sa žrtvom stupili u dijalog (Kakav dijalog!? Žrtva je po definiciji nijema!), konfiscirali su njezin jezik (Žrtva je tu da pati, a ne da sama artikulira svoju nesreću), postali su njezinim tumačima (Jezik žrtve ionako je neupotrebljiv u kodovima zapadnog tržišta), zastupnicima njezine nesreće za koju će, dakako, uzeti svoj postotak" (309). It needs to be stressed that at the conclusion of the chapter from which this citation is taken, Ugrešić unequivocally questions her right to make such judgements, writing "[a]nd finally, what gives me the right to judge such things, where is the proof, where are the facts? Let us remember, this is after all only a story. I myself am a *Trümmerfrau*, a *sub-tenant*, a *bastard*, a *nomad*, a *Wossie*. I have no other proof" (251). Croatian: "I na kraju, otkud meni pravo da sudim o takvim stvarima, gdje su dokazi, gdje su podaci? Prisjetimo se, ovo je ipak samo priča. Sama sam *bastard*, *wossie*. Drugim dokazima ne raspolazem" (311).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 226. Croatian: "ljubitelja 'katastrofičkog turizma,' zalutalih znatiželjnika, fotografa, lovaca na jaka osjećanja" (283).

<sup>102</sup> This is a paraphrase of the sentence that follows the previously cited one on page 226 (Croatian; 283).

philanthropists"?<sup>103</sup> Am I like the wartime foreign journalists, who "thinking they were writing 'the truth and nothing but the truth' sold the world someone else's misery for their own well being"?<sup>104</sup> Don't I, like Ugrešić's imagined "Yugo-intellectual," realise that "human misfortune is easily transformed into intellectual and artistic porn"?<sup>105</sup>

Alongside Bernard Henry-Levi, Alain Finkelkraut, Peter Handke, Milan Kundera, and György Konrád, Susan Sontag is one of the western intellectuals named and ironized by Ugrešić in her essays, their respective engagements in the Yugoslav wars representative of how the country's disintegration "quickenened the moral pulse of intellectual Europe."<sup>106</sup> Responding not to Ugrešić (whose irony is aimed in all directions, including herself), but to the "breath-taking provincialism" of adherents of "the society of spectacle" such as Guy du Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and "several distinguished French day-trippers to Sarajevo during the siege,"<sup>107</sup>

Sontag fires:

Citizens of modernity, consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk, are schooled to be cynical about the possibility of sincerity. Some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved. How much easier, from one's chair, far from danger, to claim the position of superiority. In fact, deriding the efforts of those who have borne witness in war zones as 'war tourism' is such a recurrent judgement that it has spilled over into the discussion of war photography as a profession.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 181. Croatian: "zagovarači pravde na tuđem terenu, intelektualni borci za istinu, intelektualni dobročinitelji" (232).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 82. Croatian: "misleći da pišu istinu i samo istinu, prodali svijetu tuđu nesreću za osobnu sreću" (105). Ugrešić does, however, concede that there were brave exceptions.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 182. Croatian: "ljudska nesreća s lakoćom pretvara u intelektualistički i umjetnički porno" (233).

<sup>106</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 178. Croatian: "Rat je ubrzao moralni puls intelektualne Evrope" (228).

<sup>107</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 110.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 112.

Although I allow that the comparison may be both immodest and perhaps not entirely congruent, I can't help identifying with Sontag's sentiment, both in terms of my own engagement in post-war Yugoslavia, and indeed the position from which I write the present study. I imagine readers who (as a senior North American academic cautioned me) might dismiss my work as that of an "orientalizing, privileged, white male" as the same as those Sontag describes above: armchair warriors "schooled to be cynical about the possibility of sincerity," ever so ready to claim superiority, far from danger, and infinitely removed from real experience; those who would do or write anything to champion the "subaltern," except spending time with him or her in any capacity that does not contain excellent possibility for self-advancement.

Near the conclusion of *Regarding the Pain of Others* Sontag gets to the heart of the matter: "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, that knowledge that has been communicated."<sup>109</sup> Years after first really registering the war in Bosnia through the sounds and images of a U2 song, and then having contact with those who had escaped the country, the most ethical explanation of why I went to teach in Bosnia was to try and do something with the feelings that had been aroused. The present study is an attempt to do something with both the first-hand knowledge communicated in the four years I spent in the region, and the knowledge subsequently acquired through scholarship. In terms of "eastern Europe" more broadly, it is informed by numerous trips throughout the region over more than a decade, and not least the

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 110.

almost two years I spent based in (the former East) Berlin during its writing. For all this, it seems banal to have to stress that it is on the basis of its contribution to scholarship, not the geographic and biological facts of my birth, that I wish my work to be considered.<sup>110</sup>

### 1.7 “[e]astern Europe”

Not entirely changing tack, my second caveat concerns the use of the term “eastern Europe.” It seems that every new reflection on the nomenclature faces the defeat of falling somewhere between the epitaph “*Ah! tout est bu, tout est mangé! Plus rien à dire!*” and the aphorism “*Toutes choses sont dites déjà; mais comme personne n’écoute, il faut toujours recommencer.*”<sup>111</sup> The sum of accumulated erudition on the subject is, or at least should be, enough to dissipate the most persistent academic instinct for graphomania. In fact, so much has been said that it often seems that a Benjaminian compiling of quotations might well be the only legitimate way to avoid inadvertently plagiarizing something someone else once put much better. So before addressing some of Ugrešić’s writings on the subject, let me begin with two anecdotes.

In Munich over a decade ago I was witness to an uncanny reinforcement of Miłosz’s famous claim that the only thing western Europeans seemed to know

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<sup>110</sup> And what of my “percentage” and my “privilege”? Given that in Bosnia and Serbia I had a university teaching post and an in-demand asset (English, and later, local language skills), in terms of earning potential I was relatively privileged, but in the economic conditions of post-war Bosnia and post-Milošević Serbia, in the absence of local family support, this privilege often involved working three jobs and 60 hour weeks to make ends meet. Now I look at it as the privilege of a lesson in economics I will never forget.

<sup>111</sup> Trans: “Ah! everything has been drunk, everything has been eaten! There’s nothing left to say!” (Paul Verlaine). “Everything has been said before; but given that nobody listens, it is always necessary to go back to the beginning and start again” (André Gide).

about the European East was that it was cold.<sup>112</sup> On a bitter December night in the student dormitory where we lived, a Polish friend mentioned that he was driving home to Krakow for Christmas, to which a mutual German friend automatically responded, “Oh Mann, es muss drüben im Osten *saukalt* sein” (“Oh man, it must be *bloody cold* over there in the East”), as if Krakow was in Siberia. Why western Europeans know so little—and often appear to care even less—about Europe “east of the Elbe” is a specifically east European frustration. In Berlin in early 2010, a new German acquaintance mentioned to me that she was born in Frankfurt. I asked if she meant Frankfurt am Main or Frankfurt an der Oder, to which she replied: “Frankfurt an der Oder existiert nicht für mich” (“Frankfurt an der Oder doesn’t exist for me.”) For someone whose family name was Dymek (and whose paternal family, as I later found out, had left East Prussia after the First World War) I found this an odd response. Judging from an anecdote Ugrešić relates in *The Culture of Lies*, it wasn’t. She asks a western European acquaintance to sketch her internal map of Europe, and the acquaintance replies: “This is where I am. Round me are Germany, Belgium, this is France, that’s England, down there is Italy, and, yes, then there are Spain and Portugal as well, and here is a line. Beyond that line is nothing, a great blank.”<sup>113</sup>

Like my (west) German acquaintance, the internal map of Europe of the western European Ugrešić describes didn’t extend further east than Berlin. Ugrešić’s acquaintance was, as Ugrešić writes, “not stupid or uneducated or insensitive.

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<sup>112</sup> See Czesław Miłosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*, trans. Catherine S. Leach (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 2.

<sup>113</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 239. Croatian: “Eto, ovdje sam ja. Oko mene su Njemačka, Belgija, tu je Francuska, tamo Engleska, dolje je Italija, da, postoje još Španjolska i Portugal, a ovdje je crta. Iza crte je jedno veliko ništa” (298).

She was just being honest.”<sup>114</sup> The reality is, as Ugrešić writes elsewhere, that “[t]he statelets which have hatched out of the ruins of communism still do not exist on the mental map of Europe.”<sup>115</sup> During the time of the Cold War, Miłosz suggested that eastern Europe is a territory marked *ubi leones* (where the lions are), the medieval cartographer’s favoured designation for an unknown hinterland.<sup>116</sup> Arguably, little has changed.

Ignorance, however, is far from the full extent of the problem. As Ugrešić suggests with reference to westerners’ non-ability to differentiate between the open-bordered “soft communism” of socialist Yugoslavia and closed-bordered “hard communism” of the Warsaw Pact countries, ignorance comes in a packet with negative essentialism:

I was used to foreigners asking me what it was like behind ‘the iron curtain,’ telling me that they had been in my *Yugoslovakia* and what a wonderful city our capital Budapest was. I was used to Swedes telling me that our migrant workers kept pigs in their bathrooms, Germans telling me about dirty lavatories and lazy waiters on the Adriatic coast, I was used to Parisians talking about the yugomafia, and Londoners about ‘ustashas’ and ‘chetniks’, the fear of civilized Europe. Ha-ha, you’re a dangerous lot, down there . . . <sup>117</sup>

Writing from America, Ugrešić relates how American friends assume that as a postcommunist refugee, desperate after so many years torturedly waiting in line

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “nije ni glupa ni neobrazovana niti neosjetljiva. Bila je naprosto iskrena.”

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 247. Croatian: “Država koje su se izlegle iz ruševina komunizma zasada još uvijek nema na mentalnoj karti Evrope” (307).

<sup>116</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 7.

<sup>117</sup> Ugrešić, *Have a Nice Day*, 28. Croatian: “Navikla sam da me stranci pitaju kako mi je iza ‘željezne zavjese,’ da mi srdačno objašnjavaju kako su bili u mojoj Jugoslaviji i kako je naš glavni grad Budimpešta divan. Navikla sam da mi Šveđani govore kako naši gastarbajteri drže u kupaonicama svinje, Nijemci o prljavim zahodima i lijenim konobarima na Jadranskom moru, navikla sam da mi Parižani govore o jugo-mafiji, a Londonci o ‘ustašama’ i ‘četnicama,’ trepetu civilizirane Evrope. Ha-ha, opasni ste vi, tamo dolje” (24).

for toilet paper, she is sure to want to stay in the United States.<sup>118</sup> At a gathering of ex-Yugoslavs in a New York apartment, a journalist lays out her plans to sell “crap from the communist basement . . . the expected picture of the world, stereotypes about life behind the ‘Iron Curtain,’ stereotypes about grey dehumanized Eastern Europe and waiting in line for sauerkraut.”<sup>119</sup> When her fellow countrymen protest that they never waited in line for sauerkraut, she elegantly replies: “So what, it’s important to maintain the general stereotype and sell it.”<sup>120</sup> In the specific context of the Yugoslav wars, this ignorance was coupled with indifference:

While factories in the Balkans are labouring to produce lies, deaths and utter annihilation, neighbouring countries are producing protective filters of indifference. I understand that we, down there, are the shit of Europe, an awkward problem, a handicapped relation. I can also understand that Europe only wants pink, healthy, compatible members in its family.<sup>121</sup>

In multiple iterations across her essay collections, Ugrešić maintains that the ruins of the Berlin Wall had a devastating effect on the western ego, teasing that the stories of wealthy Russians sending their children to Swiss boarding schools and buying villas on the Côte d’Azur, of a Moscow “that no longer bathes in tears but swims in money,”<sup>122</sup> have all destroyed westerners’ long-cherished self-confidence in their better life. And for the westerner who wasn’t indifferent to

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 80. Croatian, 67.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 67. Croatian: “smeće iz komunističke ropotarnice . . . očekivanu sliku svijeta, stereotype o životu iza ‘željezne zavjese,’ stereotype o sivoj, odljuđenoj Istočnoj Evropi koja čeka u redu za kiseli kupus” (57).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Nije važno. Važno je da *oni* misle da smo čekali.”

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 24. Croatian: “Dok na Balkanu zahuktale tvornice proizvode laži, smrt i totalno uništenje, odmah tu, u susjedstvu, zemlje proizvode zaštitne filtere ravnodušnosti. Ja shvaćam da smo mi, mi tamo dolje, govno Evrope, neugodan problem, debilna rođakinja. Ja mogu razumjeti i to da Evropa u svojoj obitelji želi samo rumene, zdrave i kompatibilne članove” (21).

<sup>122</sup> Ugrešić, *Nobody’s Home*, 263. Croatian: “se više ne kupa u suzama nego pliva u novcu” (234).

eastern Europe, the crushed ego has been accompanied by an irretrievable loss, his affair with the “sleepy, pale beauty”<sup>123</sup> over. Eastern Europe, the mistress who had strengthened his marriage, the one he had never intended to marry, the confidence booster who had meant love without reciprocity (he could go to her, but she couldn’t get to him),<sup>124</sup> died in the ruins of the Wall.

Unsurprisingly, in the region the term “Eastern Europe” has been an inflammatory one for as least as long as Milan Kundera began promoting the alternative “Central Europe”<sup>125</sup> in the mid-1980s.<sup>126</sup> Kundera described “Central Europe” as “a kidnapped *Occident*,” a “piece of the Latin West which has fallen under Russian domination . . . which lies geographically in the centre, culturally in the West and politically in the East.” Yet his efforts to introduce the “Central Europe” nomenclature and refute the (western) assumption of both a “Slavic world” and the existence of “Eastern Europe” have, in recent years, seen him taken to task by postcolonial scholars for “othering” Russia and attempting to hang a new Iron Curtain further to the East.<sup>127</sup> As Larry Wolff and others have

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<sup>123</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 236. Croatian: “ta uspavana, bljedolika ljepotica” (295).

<sup>124</sup> See *Culture of Lies*, 240-1 (*Kultura laži*, 300).

<sup>125</sup> Although both Miłosz and the Hungarian György Konrád supported Kundera, Yugoslav luminaries such as Danilo Kiš and Miroslav Krleža were far less enamoured with the term. For Kiš, speaking of a “Central European culture” as a coherent supranational entity was a historical impossibility, “the differences in national cultures being greater than the similarities, the antagonisms more alive than the agreements.” (Danilo Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 96.) For Krleža, the term “Central Europe” didn’t mean any more than similar variants such as Central America, Central Africa, and Central Asia, and as to what it might mean for literature, he claimed to have no idea. (See Predrag Matvejević, *Razgovori s Krležom*, 64.)

<sup>126</sup> Kundera’s first essay was entitled “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” and published in *The New York Review of Books*, April 26, 1984. (The essay was initially published in French under the title “Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragedie de l’Europe centrale,” in *Le Debat*, November 1983, no. 27.) Kundera’s second essay, “An Introduction to a Variation,” was again published in *The New York Review of Books* (January 6, 1985) and drew a sharp response from Joseph Brodsky entitled “Why Milan Kundera is Wrong about Dostoyevski,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 17, 1985.

<sup>127</sup> Nataša Kovačević is perhaps most severe in this respect, writing (vis-à-vis Kundera) that Central Europe is “a term marking a desperate attempt to escape designation as Eastern European.” *Narrating Post/Communism*, 9.



written at length, since the Enlightenment the term “Eastern Europe” has become less a geographical designation and more a metaphor for backwardness and primitivism—“the *Hinterland* of the European *Reich*,”<sup>128</sup> the dark other of the enlightened West.

In an anecdote about a woman in Kaliningrad selling homemade cakes on a makeshift stand bearing the sign *keks zapadnyi* (“western cookie”) Ugrešić illustrates the desperate desire to, at least lexically, escape the eastern hinterland. Asked why the cakes are “western,” the woman triumphantly replies, “[b]ecause we are the West!”<sup>129</sup> In a similar vein Ugrešić relates the story of a Slovak writer, who, on a train journey west to east across Europe, explains his happiness at never having been to “Eastern Europe” before (meaning, Russia and Belarus), and how the present trip had validated his conviction that there had never been any reason to visit. Asked why, he assuredly replies: “Because it is a whole other world! They are entirely different people!”<sup>130</sup> On this startling lack of solidarity Ugrešić ironically comments that “[t]hey [east Europeans] were all in the same shit, the same contemptible human trash. And no one could make him consider them his *brothers*. What kind of brotherhood was that supposed to be, brotherhood in misfortune!?”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Anonymous commentator, quoted in Étienne Balibar, *We the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 123; quoted in Kovačević, 12.

<sup>129</sup> Ugrešić, *Nobody's Home*, 91. Croatian: “Zato što smo mi Zapad!” (122).

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 95. Croatian: “Zato što je to drugi svijet! To su naprosto drugi ljudi!” (126).

<sup>131</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 242. Croatian: “Bili su u istom govnu, isto ljudsko smeće dostojno prezira. I nitko ga nije mogao natjerati da ih smatra braćom. Kakvo je to bratstvo, bratstvo po nesreći!?” (302).

In the (post-)Yugoslav context, Milica Bakić-Hayden suggests the theoretical formulation of “nestling Orientalism”<sup>132</sup> to explain the incessant desire to distance oneself from those further east. Recalling his Yugoslav childhood in the 1980s, Bosnian writer Muharem Bazdulj illustrates the phenomenon. In the time of the Cold War, Yugoslavs looked down on citizens of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, further down on those who lived in Romania and Bulgaria, yet reserved their greatest contempt for the “backwardness” of Albanians. Given Albania’s ironic geographical coordinates, a popular question and answer joke was born: *What is the poorest country in the world? Answer: Macedonia—fuck the country for which Albania is the West.*<sup>133</sup> Confirming the joke from a different angle, Ugrišić writes of a Bosnian Muslim academic at an American university who (during the war) complains that a particular Croatian journalist keeps writing about Bosnian Muslims “as though we were some kind of “Shiptars!””<sup>134</sup> (Although “Shiptar” is actually the Albanian word for “Albanian,” it is used by speakers of Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian as a pejorative in place of the regular “Albanac.”) In the broader post-Yugoslav context, the phenomenon is just as easily exemplified by the 1995 declaration of then Slovenian prime minister, Janez Drnovšek, that his electorate faced a choice “between Europe and the Balkans”<sup>135</sup> or the persistent Croatian insistence that the country has always been part of Central Europe: “What do they mean, Balkans? What nonsense!”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Milica Bakić-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (Winter, 1995): 917-931.

<sup>133</sup> Original: “*Koja je zemlja najsiromašnija na svijetu? Odgovor: Makedonija . . . Jebo zemlju kojoj je Albanija zapad.*” Muharem Bazdulj, “Na zapadu ništa novo (o krajnostima južnoslovenskog okcidentalizma),” *Sarajevske Sveske*, 6/7 (2004): 155-56.

<sup>134</sup> Ugrišić, *Culture of Lies*, Croatian: “kao da smo mi neki tamo... Šiptari!” (305).

<sup>135</sup> Cited in Rastko Močnik, “The Balkans as an Element in Ideological Mechanisms,” in *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, eds., D. Bjelić and O. Savić (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 94; quoted in Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism*, 11.

<sup>136</sup> Ugrišić, *Culture of Lies*, 238. Croatian: “Ma kakav Balkan, kakvi bakrač!” (298).

Where then, does all this leave me in terms of the nomenclature “eastern Europe”? In *The Culture of Lies* Ugrešić offers the explicit warning that “[a]ny serious literary theoretician or historian of literature is reluctant to get involved in constructions on shaky ground,” but immediately lays down an implicit challenge, that

perhaps one day someone will take on the cultural-commemorative task of building a more acceptable construct, an “anti-formative” model which will articulate the common features of the different cultures which functioned under the cupola of a more or less common ideological system.<sup>137</sup>

With regard to “eastern Europe,” it is my view that the idea of a post-1989 literature of the ruins—of *Trümmerliteratur Redux*—could function as one such “anti-formative” model. Following the lead of Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis I use a lower case “e” (except when quoting directly from others) in the hope of signifying that “eastern Europe” is being used as an (approximate) geographical appellation.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, I use the term because it is that originally used by Jančar, and—for all her contesting of it—it is that preferred by Ugrešić. Finally, I use it because I don’t believe it more or less contentious than the alternatives.<sup>139</sup> In fact, I would suggest that whimsy is perhaps the only sensible way out of the internecine quality of the whole nomenclature debate. In a

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 158. Croatian: “Svaki ozbiljan književni teoretičar ili povjesničar književnosti nerado se upušta u konstrukcije na klizavu terenu. Pa ipak, možda će se netko jednoga dana prihvatiti kulturno-komemorativnog posla i izgraditi prihvatljiv konstrukt, antiformalni model koji će artikulirati zajednička obilježja različitih kultura koje su živjele pod kupolom više-manje zajedničkog ideološkog sistema” (205).

<sup>138</sup> Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, eds., *Under Eastern Eyes: A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe* (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2008), ix.

<sup>139</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the nomenclature debate, see John Neubauer, “What’s in a Name? Mitteleuropa, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, East-Central Europe,” *Kakanien Revisited*, May 7, 2003, <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/theorie/JNeubauer1.pdf> [accessed July 30, 2011].

delightful collection of post-1989 marginalia, Bohumil Hrabal asks

. . . where does Eastern Europe really begin? For the Sudeten Germans the Balkans began in North Bohemia, just past Lovosice . . . For me, on the other hand, Eastern Europe used to begin where the Empire-style Austrian railway stations ended. However! For the artists of the Café Slavia Eastern Europe begins in the Karlín district of Prague. The composer Rychlík obstinately insisted that Eastern Europe began just beyond Prague's Poříčí Gate.<sup>140</sup>

Many scholars enjoy playing this game of blind man's bluff, yet, removing their self-tied blindfolds, almost all know perfectly well where "eastern Europe" is. Furthermore, it bears remembering that as much as there exists a western European narrative about eastern Europe, from Dostoevsky onwards there exists an often no less problematic reverse narrative. As Ugrešić herself put it to me, "in the course of literary history the European East and European West have jointly authored a single cultural text, something like an epistolary novel. The novel didn't end with the fall of the Wall."<sup>141</sup>

### 1.8 Other Caveats

The most ambitious single-authored study of literary developments in post-1989 eastern Europe is almost certainly Andrew Wachtel's *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*.<sup>142</sup> As Wachtel outlines in the acknowledgements, in the research phase of the book he engaged the

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<sup>140</sup> Bohumil Hrabal, *Total Fears: Letters to Dubenka*, trans. James Naughton (Prague: Twisted Spoon, 2001), 126.

<sup>141</sup> Personal e-mail communication from Dubravka Ugrešić to David Williams, June 14, 2011. Croatian: "Evropski Istok i evropski Zapad kroz književnu povijest zajednički ispisuju jedan kulturni tekst, koji je poput epistolarnog romana. Taj roman se nije završio s padom Zida."

<sup>142</sup> Andrew Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

services of 19 researchers spread across ten east European countries, with researchers presenting individual country reports at a later conference. As he concedes in the introduction, the book “is not meant to be an encyclopedic study of what [literature] has been produced in Eastern Europe since 1989,”<sup>143</sup> and he acknowledges the scant (or non-existent) attention paid to countries such as Albania, Macedonia, the Baltic states, and Belarus. This commendable level of disclosure notwithstanding, the book drew a scathing review in the pre-eminent British Slavic journal, the reviewer concluding:

I am not convinced he [Wachtel] knows it all sufficiently to pass the kinds of judgements he does. Perhaps, as for some writers he describes, the desire to maintain relevance inevitably necessitates methodological compromises, leading to a superficiality that East European literature needs least.<sup>144</sup>

With the above in mind, I would (once again) wish to stress that the present study is primarily concerned with the post-Yugoslav writings of Dubravka Ugrešić, and primarily with the aspects of these writings that support the study’s central tenets. In also considering post-1989 novels by four other east European writers (former East Germans Ingo Schulze and Clemens Meyer, the Czech Jáchym Topol, and the Franco-Czech Kundera), I nevertheless wish to underline the broader currency of a “literature of the ‘east European ruins.’” Although Jančar generalises in his original formulation, I am certainly not attempting to

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>144</sup> Rajendra Chitnis, review of Andrew Wachtel’s *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*, in *The Slavonic and East European Review* 86, no. 4 (October, 2008): 718. Chitnis’s rather stropy review should perhaps be read as returning Wachtel the favour for his unfavourable review of Chitnis’s own *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech and Slovak Fiction of the Changes, 1988-1998* in the same journal (83, no. 4 (October, 2005): 748-749).

gather all post-1989 east European literary production under the skirt of *Trümmerliteratur Redux*.<sup>145</sup> (Let us remember that Böll's "Bekenntnis zur Trümmerliteratur" in no way sought to encompass all post-war German literary production.) Neither do the works by Ugrešić and others discussed here in any way constitute an exhaustive list of post-1989 east European writing in which ruins appear as a prominent trope. The present study offers a conceptual framework within which other works may be placed—and whose later inclusion may of course challenge, adjust, expand, or refine the parameters and arguments it sets out.

Non-theologically speaking, the present study has catholic tastes, and is responsive to an indiscriminate range of writers, thinkers, and scholars. Given that east European literary scholarship is hardly a crowded field (at least compared to the Shakespeare, Joyce, or Roth industries), I place considerable emphasis on cultural and literary essays written by east European writers themselves. *Inter alia*, writers such as Ugrešić, Kundera, Brodsky, Miłosz, Christa Wolf, Ivan Klíma, and Jana Hensel have all written of east European literature and culture with an intellectual firepower and aesthetic élan often unrivalled by literary scholarship itself. In the belief that one may illuminate the other, I likewise make free reference to relevant works of pre- and post-1989 east European fiction when I feel they offer relevant parallels to or framing of

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<sup>145</sup> For example, Jančar's most well-known novel in English, *Posmehljivo poželenje* (*Mocking Desire*, 1993), a comic caper about a Slovenian writer who spends a semester teaching Creative Writing at a university in New Orleans, would be almost impossible to situate within any framework of a post-1989 literature of the ruins.

Ugrešić's work.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, the present study is deeply-rooted in both scholarship and commentary from the former Yugoslavia, the vast majority of which will be appearing in (my) English translation for the first time.

My final significant caveat is to underline that my coinage and use of the term *Trümmerliteratur Redux* is in no way to suggest any *direct equation* between the posited post-1989 "literature of the ruins" and the post-WWII *Trümmerliteratur* practised and defined by Böll. Ugrešić's postmodern assemblages of intertextual fragments, magical realist excursions, and essayistic digressions have little mimetically in common with the stark realism demanded by Böll. (The programmatic nature of Böll's text was, however, never reflected in a homogeneous mode of literary expression among the writers of *Trümmerliteratur*.) For Böll the idea of a literature of war, return, and ruins was inextricably bound with his own experience as a soldier and returning home to a desolate and defeated homeland. As a non-combatant and later exile, Ugrešić never represents the physical violence of the Yugoslav wars, but rather its effects.<sup>147</sup> The events to which each writer broadly responds—the defeats of fascism and communism in Europe—cannot be equated beyond the fact that their ideological struggle defined what Günter Grass called "d[as] Jahrhundert der Vertreibungen" ("the century of expulsions").<sup>148</sup> The grief in Böll's fiction at the physical and metaphysical detritus left by fascism's exit from the stage of

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<sup>146</sup> As will become evident, the fiction, essays, and "writerly situation" of Milan Kundera are in manifold ways extremely useful in illuminating both Ugrešić's writings and her writerly situation. Moreover, Kundera is the writer to whom Ugrešić makes the single greatest number of intertextual references.

<sup>147</sup> This, interestingly, makes Ugrešić representative of the norm in post-Yugoslav fiction from Croatia. See Jurica Pavičić, "Prošlo je vrijeme Sumatra i Javi," *Sarajevske Sveske* 5 (2004): 125-35.

<sup>148</sup> Günter Grass, *Unkenrufe: Eine Erzählung* (Göttingen: Steidl, 1992), 72; translated by Ralph Manheim as *The Call of the Toad* (New York: Harvest, 1993), 69.

history is of a vastly different nature to the ambiguity that marks Ugrešič's literary evocations of the postcommunist and post-Yugoslav everyday.

### 1.9 What Might Jančar Have Had in Mind?

The above caveats declared, it is not difficult to follow the associative links between the respective post-1945 and post-1989 literary situations that Jančar must have had in mind. Both 1945 and 1989 have been understood as a *Stunde Null*, a “zero hour,” with all the problematics of continuity and caesura—real and perceived—that the term implies.<sup>149</sup> While the term *Stunde Null* is absent from post-1989 east European literary scholarship, both writers and literary scholars have suggested that something very similar occurred. Stripped of its romantic extraliterary appeal when eastern Europe's heroic struggle against totalitarianism became last year's snow, for western readers the irrelevance of east European literature quickly came to mirror the region's newfound geopolitical insignificance. Confronted with the realisation that abroad, “*Der Osten zieht nicht mehr*” (“the East doesn't pull anymore”<sup>150</sup>), at home east European writers soon faced the humiliation of the diktats of the marketplace quickly replacing the diktats of ideology. As the narrator of Jáchym Topol's *Sestra*

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<sup>149</sup> That German literary scholarship since the 1960s has ritually debunked the idea that 1945 and the years that followed were a *Stunde Null* has, as Stephen Brockmann observes, “paradoxically, contributed to its dominance as a concept.” Stephen Brockmann, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004), 2. Perhaps it was in this light that Jürgen Habermas expressed his unease at popular use of the term in the context of the events of 1989 in his correspondence with Christa Wolf (see Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, 109-11). For more on the specific German context, see Andreas Huyssen, “Rewritings and New Beginnings: W.G. Sebald and the Literature on the Air War,” in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 138-57.

<sup>150</sup> Jančar, *Šala, ironija*, 20. Jančar is relating the story of a translator of Slovenian literature who in the late nineties suggests the translation of a Slovenian novel to a German publisher and receives this bluntest of replies.



(translated as *City Sister Silver*) puts it: “ideology’s down the crapper, that leaves cash.”<sup>151</sup>

With a “zero hour” declared in both 1945 and 1989, among the ruins of the literary past, the *Zeitgeist* of both eras was one of declared new beginnings. Gustav Rene Hocke spoke for many when dismissing the post-WWII literary efforts of the older generation of German writers as “calligraphy,”<sup>152</sup> many of these “calligraphers” having been part of the so-called *innere Emigration*. In “Bekanntnis zur Trümmerliteratur” Böll links aestheticism to the *Blindekuh-Schriftsteller* (“blindman’s-bluff writer”), who instead of using his eyes to depict the reality around him, gazes inward and “builds a world to suit himself.”<sup>153</sup> The desire for a new *Kahlschlag* (“clear-cutting”) literature was clearly articulated by the returned exile Alfred Döblin, who, in 1946, insisted that German culture needed “a new realist literature that clears away the residues of the old literature of lies and repressions.”<sup>154</sup>

Fast-forwarding four and a half decades, in newly-reunified Germany a feuilleton-driven debate originally spawned by the publication of Christa Wolf’s novella *Was Bleibt* (*What Remains*, 1990) saw conservative commentators launch an assault on both postwar German literatures as *Gesinnungskitsch* (“moralizing kitsch”). With GDR literature having officially died with the state itself, Frank Schirrmacher declared the same for the literature of the Federal

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<sup>151</sup> Jáchym Topol, *City Sister Silver*, trans. Alex Zucker (North Hampton, CT: Catbird Press, 2000), 181; originally published as *Sestra* (Brno: Atlantis, 1994).

<sup>152</sup> See Brockmann, *German Literary Culture*, 191.

<sup>153</sup> Böll, “Trümmerliteratur.” German: “er baut sich eine Welt zurecht” (342).

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

Republic, pronouncing it “braindead at age 43 (1947-1990).”<sup>155</sup> As Huyssen suggests, the temporal reference to *Gruppe 47* (of which Böll was a key member) was to call an end to the leftist literary culture that had dominated West German literature, and to issue a demand for a new aestheticism in German letters, a literature “untainted” by social realities or political engagement.<sup>156</sup> With regard to Czech literature, Chitnis cites a 1995 essay by literary critic Jiří Kratochvíl that offers a different variant of the same narrative. Kratochvíl writes of Czech literature’s new found liberation from “all social commitments and national expectations,” and of a new generation “turning its back on both the literature of the 1960s and the official and unofficial literature of the twenty years of occupation” in service of a literature that “with relish scorns all ideologies, missions and services to the people or to anyone.”<sup>157</sup> As Yugoslavia collapsed, in Croatia the narrative of “new beginnings” was the same—but with an important difference. Declaring an end to the postmodern literature prevalent in Yugoslavia in the 1980s (exemplified by Ugrešić’s fiction), Ante Stamać, a prominent literary theorist and fledgling nationalist intellectual, famously declared: *Prošlo je vrijeme Sumatra i Javi!* (“the time of Sumatra and Java is over!”)<sup>158</sup> Stamać’s bizarre démarche on the fate of Indonesian islands was nothing less than a call for literature to give up its playful self-referential obsessions and serve in the very

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<sup>155</sup> Frank Schirrmacher, “Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik. Neue Pässe, neue Identitäten. Über die Kündigung einiger Mythen des westdeutschen Bewußtseins.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 2, 1990. Quoted in Huyssen, “After the Wall,” 53.

<sup>156</sup> While *Gruppe 47* writers may have been of left liberal conscience, as Kristen Rebien points out, “even a cursory examination of texts presented at the meetings between 1947 and 1967 makes it immediately apparent that no single aesthetic model prevailed in *Gruppe 47*. It is impossible to associate the group with any particular type of writing. The literary production within the group followed the same diverse trends and patterns as literature outside of it.” Kristin Rebien, “*Gruppe 47*: Literature, Politics, and the Political Economy of Postwar Publishing,” *German Life and Letters* 62, no. 4 (2009): 456.

<sup>157</sup> Quoted in Chitnis, *Fiction of the Changes*, 10.

<sup>158</sup> Quoted in Pavičić, “Prošlo je vrijeme Sumatra i Javi”: 125.

real Croatian independence project.

When Böll writes “[t]hey labelled our generation’s first literary attempts post-1945 as ‘Trümmerliteratur,’ and in doing so, tried to dismiss it,”<sup>159</sup> he does so with the luxury available to the essayist and never lets on to whom the “they” refers. Jančar’s “[i]n today’s Europe they hold all that we’ve seen against us”<sup>160</sup> is equally economical. For the time being we might simply recall that Böll’s “melancholy novel of the ruins,”<sup>161</sup> *Der Engel schwieg* (translated as *The Silent Angel*), originally written between 1949 and 1950, was only published posthumously in 1992 on what would have been his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. His original publisher had written to him advising that, “at the moment there is exceptionally strong resistance on the part of the reading public towards all books connected with the war,” recommending that he “thematically move past the war and on to new subjects,” which could be “equally engaged,” as long as they were located not in the experience of the war, but in the “present and the future.”<sup>162</sup> We might also remember the preface to Wolfgang Borchert’s *Draußen vor der Tür* (1947, translated as *The Man Outside*), which read that it was “a work that no theatre wants to perform and no audience wants to see.”<sup>163</sup> While Jančar’s claim that the post-1989 literature of the ruins never stood a chance at home or abroad is

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<sup>159</sup> Böll, “Trümmerliteratur.” German: “Die ersten schriftstellerischen Versuche unserer Generation nach 1945 hat man als Trümmerliteratur bezeichnet, man hat sie damit abzutun versucht” (339).

<sup>160</sup> Jančar, *Šala, ironija*, 22. Croatian: “U današnjoj Europi zamjeraju nam što smo sve to vidjeli.”

<sup>161</sup> Sebald, *Natural History*, 46.

<sup>162</sup> Quoted in Werner Bellmann, “Nachwort,” in Heinrich Böll, *Der Engel schwieg* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch), 197. German: “augenblicklich eine äußerst entschiedene Abneigung des Publikums gegen alle Bücher, die etwas mit dem Krieg zu tun haben”; “thematisch über das Kriegserlebnis hinaus zu neuen Themen”; “ebenso engagierten Themen, nur aus dem Kriegserlebnis hinaus in Gegenwart und Zukunft.”

<sup>163</sup> Wolfgang Borchert, *Draußen vor der Tür* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1947). German: “Ein Stück, das kein Theater spielen und kein Publikum sehen will,” n.p.

perhaps polemically overdetermined, sideways glances to the Croatian reception of many of Ugrešić's post-Yugoslav writings suggest that it rings very true. As Gordan Duhaček maintains, in 1993, following her failure to display "the minimally required amount of delight at [Croatian President] Tuđman's Croatia,"<sup>164</sup> Ugrešić's position was best understood in terms of the opening verse of Croatian poet Antun Gustav Matoš's "1909": "Na vješalima. Suha kao prut. | Na uzničkom zidu. Zidu srama." ("In the gallows. Dry as a twig. | On the prison wall. The wall of shame."<sup>165</sup>)

Writing of what she saw with her own eyes as Yugoslavia descended into war, Ugrešić unwittingly took on the role of the messenger in classical tragedy, who, as Sebald notes, is "often strung up for [her] pains."<sup>166</sup> Particularly following her "voluntary exile" from Croatia in 1993, she was increasingly accused of "writing for foreigners." Literary history is of course littered with disputes between émigré writers and those who have remained at home, and here, for comparative purposes, we might recall Frank Thiess's post-WWII accusation—aimed at Thomas Mann—that writers of the *äußere Emigration* had watched the tragedy of Nazi Germany "from the balcony and orchestra seats of foreign countries."<sup>167</sup> The similar attacks on Ugrešić in post-independence Croatia powerfully illustrate how literary history repeats itself, often only as tragedy, the farce never announcing itself. The tragic difference is that, as a German writer, Mann's case

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<sup>164</sup> Gordan Duhaček, review of *Baba Jaga je snijela jaje*, by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Dnevni Kulturni Info*, November 25, 2008, [http://www.dnevnikulturni.info/recenzije/knjizevnost/1679/baba\\_jaga\\_je\\_snijela\\_jaje\\_-\\_dubravka\\_ugresic](http://www.dnevnikulturni.info/recenzije/knjizevnost/1679/baba_jaga_je_snijela_jaje_-_dubravka_ugresic) [accessed 30 July 2011]. Croatian: "minimalno obavezne količine oduševljenja Tuđmanovom Hrvatskom."

<sup>165</sup> The reference to Matoš is made by Duhaček in the review cited above.

<sup>166</sup> Sebald, *Natural History*, 52.

<sup>167</sup> Quoted in Brockmann, *Germany Literary Culture*, 99.

is forever encoded in literary history; as a writer from a small country, Ugrešić is unlikely to enjoy the same honour.

Sebald maintains that the horrific destruction of the Allied firebombing of Germany during the Second World War failed to enter both the collective (West) German consciousness<sup>168</sup> and consequently never became part of public discourse. He asserts that in the post-war period German writers “would not or could not describe the destruction of the German cities as millions experienced it,”<sup>169</sup> and that this failure—of individual, collective, and cultural memory—was because this experience exceeded the “tolerable.” Sebald suggests that while the vigour and determination with which Germans set about rebuilding the country was “in some respects genuinely admirable,” it was nonetheless a reconstruction “tantamount to a second liquidation in successive phases of the nation’s own past history,” one that pointed the population inexorably towards the future, prohibited any backward glance, and enjoined silence on the past.<sup>170</sup> With regard to *Trümmerliteratur* Sebald maintains that

[e]ven the frequently cited “literature of the ruins,” of its nature presupposing an unerring sense of reality and chiefly concerned, as

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<sup>168</sup> Sebald refers to “the country” in the singular, and in the context he clearly means the Federal Republic. While Sebald is naturally free to choose West Germany as his frame of reference, his implication that it was the normative (or only?) post-war German state is problematic. As Martin Kane has demonstrated, in post-war literary matters writers in East Germany went through many of the same debates as their West German colleagues—albeit in a different context. These included disputes between exiles (Brecht, Tucholsky, Robert Havemann, Erich Weinert) and those who had remained in Nazi Germany, battles over realism and formalism, and the desire for “new beginnings.” The cultural apparatchik Ackermann’s exhortation to East German writers to play their part in “der Neuaufbau Deutschlands aus den Trümmern und Ruinen” (“the reconstruction of Germany from the rubble and ruins”) was not a million miles from Böll’s own didactic exhortation to his colleagues in “Bekanntnis zur Trümmerliteratur.” See Martin Kane, “Roles for the Writer: East German Literature and the Creation of National Consciousness 1945-1952,” *The Modern Language Review* 87, no. 2 (April 1992): 358-375 (360).

<sup>169</sup> Sebald, *Natural History*, 78.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Heinrich Böll acknowledged, with “what we found when we came home,” proves on closer inspection to be an instrument already tuned to individual and collective amnesia, and probably influenced by preconscious self-censorship—a means of obscuring a world that could no longer be presented in comprehensible terms. There was a tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described.<sup>171</sup>

Fascinatingly, Wachtel makes a very similar claim in relation to post-1989 east European literature:

Considering the trauma postcommunist transition has inflicted upon writers, it is curious how few literary works have appeared that confront head-on the essence of the new realities in East European society and culture. After all, given that all local readers and writers have experienced the transition “on their own skins” . . . one would think there would be great interest among the reading public in literary works that could interpret and synthesize the recent past. And yet, writers struggling to retain their influence have for the most part shied away from this subject.<sup>172</sup>

As there is no Archimedean scale for measuring these things, it is difficult to know how many writers Sebald and Wachtel expected to “confront head-on the essence of the new realities.” However many or few this might be, on the basis of the writings discussed here, Wachtel’s claim at least seems rather specious. In these writings, Ugrešić and others confront the ruins of a disgraced utopian ideology, of Dubček’s “socialism with a human face,” and of Tito’s “brotherhood and unity.” They confront the ruins of language (exemplified by the violent dismembering of Serbo-Croatian), the ruins of literary models (exemplified by both the splintering of Yugoslav literature and almost complete disappearance of

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>172</sup> Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant*, 166.

the party, dissident, and exilic modes of writing<sup>173</sup>), and the ruins of a distinct east European cultural space. Most painfully, however, they offer literary responses to the ruins of almost half a century of everyday life buried as belonging to a compromised past.

### **1.10 Architecture**

It is perhaps not surprising that a study self-reflexively constructed from the semantic field of postcommunist ruins will occasionally end up carrying within itself the marks of the fragmented, damaged topos and locus on which its foundations lie. To this point, I have simply tried to excavate and sift through the contours of a thematic and aesthetic landscape, to clear and level a space on which four walls (in this case, the four central chapters of the study) might be raised. Although these walls have over a four-year period sometimes resembled the raw, unrendered blockwork of the houses in the Istrian interior with which I began, it is my hope that the final assemblage has been refined in such a way that the built structure as a whole ends up greater than the sum of its individual parts.

Following this introductory chapter, in Chapter Two I begin construction proper with an articulation of the ways in which literature itself in post-1989 eastern Europe can be understood as being “in ruins.” In a brief discussion of Ugrešić’s Yugoslav-era fiction, I outline her postmodern literary aesthetics, adherence to the Borghesian notion of the universal library, and attendant conviction that

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<sup>173</sup> The former Yugoslavia is the obvious exception here, the country’s collapse resuscitating the three distinctly east European authorial models that Yugoslavia had itself never really produced.

“books write books—not life”—a conviction she would later, in exile, admit was shattered by the Yugoslav wars. Rather than undertaking a systematic analysis of Ugrešić’s five essay collections—a task beyond the scope of this study—I use particular essays as entry points into discussion of relevant aspects of east European and (post-) Yugoslav literary history. These include, *inter alia*, the role of intellectuals, writers, and literature in eastern Europe from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, with particular emphasis on developments post-1989; continuity and change in the western reception of east European literature under communism and postcommunism; the literary and cultural space of the second Yugoslavia (1945-1992); the *Kulturkampf* between nationalist and cosmopolitan forces in post-independence Croatia; the wide-ranging extraliterary (and inevitably gender-coloured) attacks on Dubravka Ugrešić by (Croatian) government-sponsored media and nationalist intellectuals following the anti-nationalist positions articulated in her essays published in the West as Yugoslavia disintegrated; and finally, Ugrešić’s “voluntary exile” from Croatia in 1993 and the lasting effects this has had on both her literary production and its reception at “home” and “away.”

If Chapter Two represents the anterior wall, one that stands in front of the superstructure of literary history, the extended readings of Ugrešić’s post-Yugoslav novels *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1997) and *The Ministry of Pain* (2004) in Chapters Three and Four together form side walls boasting simultaneous east/west aspects. In the former novel the ruins in question spread from the siege of Sarajevo and post-*Wende* Berlin deep into the chronotope of the European twentieth century, while the latter highlights the ruins of a



language, literature, country, and cultural space. To lend texture and context, and in order to test Jančar's assertion that post-1989 "the literature of east European ruins has not stood a chance, at home or abroad," I also consider the "home" (Croatian) and "away" receptions of both novels in the languages usefully available to me—German, French, and English.

In suggesting the broader currency of the notion of *Trümmerliteratur Redux* as a literary-historical framework, in Chapter Five I weld together disparate works of post-1989 fiction to form a back, anchoring wall that features motifs from the preceding two chapters, reimagined in different materials. In Ingo Schulze's *Simple Storys: Ein Roman aus der ostdeutschen Provinz* (1998, *Simple Stories: A Novel from the East German Provinces*), I focus on the ruins of community and personal relationships as a diverse group of newly former East Germans—winners, losers, victims, victimizers—find themselves in circumstances in which some quickly learn to swim, while the resigned majority barely manage to wave as they drown. In Clemens Meyer's untranslated *Als wir träumten* (2006, *While we were dreaming*), I consider the compassion with which Meyer portrays a group of Leipzig teenagers slowly losing themselves to alcohol, drugs, porn, petty crime, and prostitution, and losing their lives to the wars they wage against others, each other, and themselves. Moving east to the Czech Republic, I make my way through the ruins of language and literature in Jáchym Topol's *Sestra* (1994, translated as *City Sister Silver*), a novel in which "the human community's fallen apart, just a bunch a tribes fightin' in the dark . . . allied or opposed based on

commercial considerations.”<sup>174</sup> I then move back a generation to Topol’s erstwhile countryman, Milan Kundera, reading his novel *L’Ignorance* (2002, *Ignorance*) as an exemplar of post-1989 “returnees” literature. In concluding the chapter with a discussion of Ugrešić’s most recent novel, *Baba jaga je snijela jaje* (2008, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*) I seal the join between Ugrešić’s post-Yugoslav and Yugoslav-era fiction, illustrating how it represents a departure from the *tristesse* of Yugoslavia—a departure from the “literature of the ‘east European ruins’”—and how these departures appear to have at least temporarily allowed her a “return” to Croatian letters.

Stephen Brockmann writes of Böll, Günter Grass and other *Gruppe 47* writers as “the melancholy angels of West German high literature” and “custodians of the nation’s lost conscience [to whom] fell the task of reminding Germans of what had been lost.”<sup>175</sup> Evoking the magnificent statue of Victoria, the Roman goddess of war, on whom angels gather in Wim Wenders’ *Der Himmel über Berlin* (renamed as *Wings of Desire* in Anglophone markets) Brockmann’s image of “melancholy angels” is beautifully romantic, and his invocation of “custodians of the nation’s lost conscience” an echo of Solzhenitsyn’s claims for literature as protector of the soul and living memory of a nation. While the geographically and generationally diverse group of writers I discuss in the Chapter Five in no way constitute a literary circle, their shared thematic concerns nevertheless illustrate the significant suggestive power of a “literature of the ‘east European ruins.’”

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<sup>174</sup> Topol, *City Sister Silver*, 168.

<sup>175</sup> Brockmann, *German Literary Culture*, 252.

Finally, in bringing construction to an end, in the final chapter I attempt to not only place a roof over a house assembled from ruins, but also to provide something in the way of general landscaping, including pathways towards the newer ruins of what we may soon refer to as postcapitalism. In the concluding aperçu of *The Culture of Lies*, Ugrešić reflects on her disinheritance by her former cultural milieu, and declares that having paid for her own broom, she now flies alone. In the face of her wish for solitude—and to spare her what Kundera calls “the small-context terrorism”<sup>176</sup> of national literature—this comparative study is an attempt to place her work in a much broader cultural and historical context. Moreover, with the idea of *Trümmerliteratur Redux* as its overarching piece of architecture, it seeks to reaffirm that although life may sometimes inspire literature, the post-1989 writings of Dubravka Ugrešić and others offer proof that all books have their roots in other books.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 39.

<sup>177</sup> This is a paraphrase of a point Ugrešić herself makes in the afterword to *Lend Me Your Character*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth and Michael Henry Heim, revised by Damion Searles (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 233.

## 2. "THE CITIZEN OF A RUIN"

### 2.1 Poets and Hangmen

Writing in 1994, Ugrešić remarked that the east European writer now lives

without a firm roof over his head, his literary house (whatever that meant) has been destroyed, and with it his personal and literary biography . . . He is a representative of a world which no longer exists, a tragi-comic being, a tightrope-walker overburdened with mental baggage, **the citizen of a ruin**, an eternal exile, neither here nor there, homeless, stateless, a nostalgic, a zombie, a writer without readers, a travelling salesman selling goods either nibbled by moths or peppered by shells . . . He is a loser, a seller of souvenirs of a vanished epoch and vanished landscapes, an incompatible being, both despairing and deceiving at the same time, former, from every point of view.<sup>1</sup>

How the east European writer became, post-1989, "the citizen of a ruin" is a long story, yet one that needs at least a partial retelling here. As a starting point, Andrew Wachtel's provocative suggestion that "[e]astern Europe is that part of the world where serious literature and those who produce it have traditionally been overvalued"<sup>2</sup> is better than many. As Wachtel compellingly outlines, inspired by the Herderian triad of language, nation, and (eventual) state, the majority of contemporary east European nation states were invented by writers, imagined into being by national poets on the basis of shared language (codified

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<sup>1</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 172. Croatian: "bez čvrstog krova nad glavom, njegova je književna kuća srušena, zajedno s njom i njegova osobna i njegova književna biografija . . . On je reprezentant svijeta koji više ne postoji, tragikomično biće, plesač na žici preopterećen mentalnom prtljagom, **građanin ruševine**, trajni izgnanik, ni ovdje ni ondje, *homeless, stateless*, nostalgijačar, zombi, pisac bez čitalačke publike, mali akviziter koji prodaje robu izjedenu moljcima ili izrešetanu gelerima . . . On je gubitnik, prodavač suvenira iščezle epohe i iščezlih krajolika, inkompatibilno biće, očajnik i lažac istodobno, on je bivši, *former*, u svakom pogledu" (221, my emphasis in bold).

<sup>2</sup> Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant*, 4.

by “patriotic linguistics”<sup>3</sup>) during the national awakenings or revivals beginning in the 1830s. Thus, the idea of the writer as the “father of the nation” (who apparently managed to procreate alone) became a pervasive one in east European thought. The declaration of a Slovenian scholar that “[t]he *Slovenes*, both as individuals and as a people, *cannot be conceived of without Prešeren*,”<sup>4</sup> the national poet whose statue today towers over the main square in Ljubljana, is in no way atypical.<sup>5</sup> From their role as Founding Fathers, in the communist period east European writers slipped quickly into the role of “engineers of human souls,”<sup>6</sup> their work disseminated by litero-centric education systems.

This “soul-engineering” was undertaken by the *Staatsdichter* (state poet) and the dissident in equal measure, the former tasked with inspiring the relentless optimism of a (perpetually-delayed) brighter future, while the latter set himself up in opposition—presenting the often much bleaker *defeatism* of lived and present reality. As Kundera once put it, the communist period was one in which “[t]he poet reigned along with the hangman.”<sup>7</sup> And if the anecdote about Stalin’s phone call to Pasternak seeking his opinion on Mandelstam is true, it was a time

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 13. Wachtel offers the Slovak, L’udovit Štur; the Slovene, Jernej Kopitar; the Serb, Vuk Karadžić; the Czech, Josef Dobrovský; and the Russian, Mikhail Lomonosov, as practitioners.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 21. The emphasis in italics is Wachtel’s.

<sup>5</sup> Wachtel ironically points out that “each [east European] country’s discourse insists not only that a given poet was uniquely able to express the nation’s soul but simultaneously that no other country possesses any figure remotely similar” (15). Yet as he enumerates, each country had its own France Prešeren(s): the Russians, Pushkin; the Poles, Adam Mickiewicz; the Ukrainians, Taras Shevchenko; the Bulgarians, Christo Botev and Ivan Vazon; the Romanians, Mihai Eminescu; the Hungarians, Sándor Petőfi; the Serbs and Montenegrins, Petar Petrović Njegoš; the Croats, Ivan Mažuranić.

<sup>6</sup> “The expression ‘the engineer of human souls’ is held, by many political indoctrinators, to be Stalin’s definition of the writer: as an engineer constructs a machine, so must a writer construct the mind of the New Man.” Josef Škvorecký, *The Engineer of Human Souls*, trans. Paul Wilson (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Perennial, 2001), 155.

in which poet could also be hangman.<sup>8</sup> With the writer enjoying this multiplicity of roles to greater or lesser extents throughout eastern Europe, literature, as Wachtel contends, functioned as a basic “motor of meaning creation”<sup>9</sup> in society. Indeed, in the post-war chaos of the former Yugoslavia, Bosnians of all three ethnic groups pressed me to read Ivo Andrić’s *Na Drini ćuprija* (1945, *The Bridge on the Drina*) in order that I might learn the “truth” about their dismembered homeland. It was as if Andrić’s tale of the construction of the Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge in Višegrad and its constant destruction and reconstruction was the only suitable narrative to convey the present and historical tragedy of the Balkans.

There is, however, another particular reason why writers and literature have historically been very important in eastern Europe: with the exception of Russia, eastern Europe is made up of “small nations.” (Chamberlain’s reference to Czechoslovakia in 1938 as “a far away country of which we know very little” is a useful descriptor.) In an essay entitled “The Provincialism of Small Nations,” Kundera elucidates the problematic nature of the relationship between writers from small nations and their homelands:

The small nation inculcates in its writer the conviction that he belongs to that place alone. To set his gaze beyond the boundary of the homeland, to join his colleagues in the supranational territory of art, is considered pretentious, disdainful of his own people. And since the small nations are often going through situations in which their survival is at stake,

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<sup>8</sup> Pasternak is alleged to have replied with words to the effect of, “Well, you know, we belong to different poetic schools.” The next day Mandelstam was sent to the Gulag. The irony is all the greater in light of Mandelstam’s quip that “poetry is respected only in this country [the USSR]. People are killed for it.” Quoted in Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

they readily manage to present their attitude as morally justified.<sup>10</sup>

Citing a passage from Kafka's *Diaries*<sup>11</sup> (from which Deleuze and Guattari would extrapolate the "collective enunciation" tenet in their seminal definition of a "minor literature"<sup>12</sup>) Kundera then indicates the connection with politics:

A small nation, he [Kafka] says, has great respect for its writers because they provide it with pride "in [the] face of the hostile surrounding world"; for a small nation, literature is "less a matter of literary history" than "a matter of the people," and it is that exceptional osmosis between the literature and its people that facilitates "the literature's diffusion throughout the country, where it binds with political slogans."<sup>13</sup>

The end result of this osmosis is that the writer from a small nation is never simply "just a writer," but a national representative—a position, it is fair to say, that historically many appear to have quite enjoyed, and in our time, one in which many still take pleasure. The difficulty is for those who didn't then, and those who don't now. As Kundera maintains, while Nietzsche was able to maul the German character and Stendhal get away with preferring Italy to his French homeland, "if a Greek or a Czech dared to say the same thing, his family would curse him as a detestable traitor."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kundera, *The Curtain*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg and Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken Books, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature," in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16-27.

<sup>13</sup> Kundera, *The Curtain*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 191.

## 2.2 “The Muse of Censorship”

In conversation with Ivan Klíma in the early 1990s, Philip Roth suggested that the importance of east European writers in their societies led to

a certain amount of loose, romantic talk in the West about “the muse of censorship”<sup>15</sup> behind the Iron Curtain. I would venture that there were even writers in the West who sometimes envied the terrible pressure under which you people wrote and the clarity of the mission this burden fostered: in your society you were virtually the only monitors of truth. In a censorship culture, where everybody lives a double life—of lies and truth—literature becomes a life preserver, the remnant of truth people cling to.<sup>16</sup>

In 1981, the towering figure of George Steiner came close to the “loose talk” Roth perhaps had in mind,<sup>17</sup> intoning that in “the studios, cafes, seminars, *samizdat* magazines and publishing houses, chamber-music groups, itinerant theatres, of Krakow and of Budapest, of Prague and of Dresden” lay “a reservoir of talent, of unquestioning adherence to the risks and functions of art and original thought on which generations to come will feed.”<sup>18</sup> For his part, Wachtel cites the introduction to the English translation of Kundera’s *The Farewell Party*, which

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<sup>15</sup> This “muse of censorship” is also one that at least some east European writers appeared to believe in. Quizzed on his assertion that it’s easier to write literature in a dictatorship than in a democracy, Nobel laureate Imre Kertész responded: “That was too sweeping a statement, but there’s a truth to it. Because I didn’t write what the communist government wanted to see, I was cut off and alone with my work. I never thought my book would ever be published, and so I had the freedom to write as radically as I wanted, to go as deep inside as I wanted. In a democracy you have to find a market niche, make sure a novel is ‘interesting’ and ‘spectacular.’ That may be the toughest censorship of all.” See Imre Kertész, “A Voice of Conscience,” interview by Stefan Theil, December 29, 2002, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2002/12/29/a-voice-of-conscience.html> [accessed 30 July 2011].

<sup>16</sup> Philip Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 75.

<sup>17</sup> The irony is that, having exhausted the kitchen table squabbles of Jewish Newark, in the 1970s Roth himself sought out “the muse of censorship” and frequently traveled to Czechoslovakia to fraternize with banned writers. These visits led both to him becoming the general editor of Penguin’s Writing from the Other Europe series, and to eastern Europe entering his own fiction, particularly the novella *The Prague Orgy* (1985).

<sup>18</sup> George Steiner, “The Archives of Eden,” *Salmagundi* 50/51 (Fall 1980/Winter 1981); quoted in Mark Schechner, *Up Society’s Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 100.



begins “*The Farewell Party* attests to the longevity of political oppression in Czechoslovakia by never mentioning it”<sup>19</sup> as an absurd example of how Cold War-era east European literature was milked in the West for its extraliterary appeal.<sup>20</sup>

In an essay from 1980, Danilo Kiš satirically explicated the apparent division of labour in the “literary republic,” noting that “Yugoslavs and other Hungarians” are always assigned the role of *Homo politicus* and required to “give up literature and stick to . . . politico-exotico-communistski themes.” Western European writers on the other hand, those “pure in heart and mind,” get to be *Homo poeticus* and retain franchise on everything from metaphysical obsessions and the human condition, to childhood and sunsets.<sup>21</sup> And in a 2004 essay, the Slovene Andrej Blatnik, whose own short stories of urban losers owe more to rock ‘n’ roll than any tradition of the writer as “voice of the people,” ironically imagines the post-1989 diktat of the western literary marketplace: “Dear writer from the East, if you weren’t ever imprisoned in your home country, your writing really can’t be important.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Here it is important to underline that censorship practices in literature and other arts in communist eastern Europe varied from country to country and dramatically changed in accordance with historical developments. In periods of “freezes,” i.e. following the Hungarian uprising, the Prague Spring, the declaration of martial law in Poland, the censors tended to quickly tighten their grip on what could be published. On the hand, in times of “thaw,” i.e. following the death of Stalin, in the Dubček period of liberalisation leading up to the Prague Spring, and with the introduction of Perestroika, many previously banned books suddenly became available.

<sup>21</sup> Danilo Kiš, *Homo Poeticus: Essays and Interviews*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Michael Henry Heim, Francis Jones, and Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 77.

<sup>22</sup> Andrej Blatnik, “Mickey Mouse Travels East: Cultural Shifts in Post-Communist Europe,” trans. Tamara Soban, <http://www.andrejblatnik.com/mickey.html> [accessed 30 July, 2011].

### 2.3 “Something Is Over”

There is much evidence to suggest that in the post-1989 period, in the head-on collision between what Roth contrasted as “the protected high culture of Eastern Europe” and “the world of Total Entertainment,”<sup>23</sup> east European writers came off a distant second-best. In this respect, Roth points to the irony that while totalitarianism may have protected east Europeans from the best works of their own and foreign culture, it had nevertheless also protected them from the worst excesses of mass culture. Massively reduced print runs, emasculated national budgets for culture, the deluge of translated pulp literature, and the citizenry’s dramatically lower purchasing power, all suggest east European literature’s post-1989 fall from grace. Indeed, east European writers have themselves been very productive in both declaring (and often bemoaning) a kind of post-1989 “End of Literature.” With a 1991 essay resolutely entitled “Something Is Over,” György Konrád was one of the first out of the blocks, declaring that “an age in the history of literature has come to an end,”<sup>24</sup> and that

[I]terature as we knew it under socialism—that is, literature as a national institution—has ceased to exist. Gone are our cheap books: the state no longer has an interest in whether its citizens read what its writers have to say. We writers are no longer high priests, but we are no longer heretics either. Nor was political dissent ever really the domain of literature proper: when criticism can be heard in parliament or read in the dailies, it does not need to play hide-and-seek between the covers.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Roth, *Shop Talk*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> György Konrád, *The Melancholy of Rebirth: Essays from Post-communist Central Europe, 1989-1994*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harvest, 1995), 70. According to Chitnis, Russian writer Viktor Erofeev declared “the death of Soviet literature” in an essay entitled “Pominki po sovetsskoi literature” (“A funeral feast for Soviet literature”) published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* in July 1990. See Chitnis, *Fiction of Changes*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

However, perhaps the most devastating assessment of the changed position of literature in eastern Europe is offered by Serbian writer, Mihailo Pantić:

From what had been an elite art form, which in a synthetic way recapitulated the general truths of people's experience and which deepened their understanding of reality . . . artistic literature in the postsocialist cultural model had become socially unnecessary, an almost completely private affair which lacks any social importance and which is interesting only to narrow academic circles, to writers, and to rare dedicated readers who nurture their passion as other marginal groups nurture theirs. Some people belong to satanic cults, some to the Society for Lovers of Bulldogs, and others, amazingly, read Serbian poetry.<sup>26</sup>

While Pantić's overall assessment, hyperbolic as it is, is hard to dispute, there is nonetheless an unspoken irony. What Pantić fails to note (a failure shared by the vast majority of scholars of east European literature) is that in the wake of the Yugoslav wars, literature from Bosnia, Croatia, and to a lesser extent, Serbia, was translated and published abroad as never before. Ugrešić, to her credit, has on a number of occasions pointed out that any statistical survey would quickly illustrate that in the past twenty years former Yugoslav writers have been disproportionately well translated, not least due to the publishing industry's demand for literary reportage on the Yugoslav wars.<sup>27</sup> And in terms of societal "relevance," in a 2004 interview, Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon went as far as to say that "the golden age of Bosnian literature was during the

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<sup>26</sup> Mihailo Pantić, "Promena društvene funkcije književnosti u Srbiji, 1988-2000," unpublished article (2000); quoted in Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Nataša Kovačević, "Yugoslavia, an 'Almost Forbidden Word': Cultural Policy in Times of Nationalism—An Interview with Dubravka Ugrešić," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 3 (2007): 311.

war, because people in Sarajevo and elsewhere thought that writing and publishing was a form of resistance.”<sup>28</sup>

Both Jasmina Lukić and Slavenka Drakulić have noted that the militant nationalism of the Yugoslav wars turned many of the disintegrating country's writers into “dissidents” and internal and external emigrants at the very time that the fall of the Berlin Wall had all but erased these writerly models elsewhere in eastern Europe.<sup>29</sup> As Lukić lucidly observes, “the war put writers from the former Yugoslavia in the very position they had previously assigned to others, to ‘east European writers,’ among whom they had generally not included themselves.”<sup>30</sup> In order to understand this positional switch, and particularly, how it affected Dubravka Ugrešić, we need to more closely consider the unique place Yugoslavia occupied in Cold War Europe.

## 2.4 Between East and West

Political scientists often describe the second Yugoslavia, 1945-1992, as a paradigm buster. Although nominally a communist country, Yugoslavia was never a Warsaw Pact signatory; its citizens were free to travel both east and west, enjoyed a relatively high standard of living, and had relatively uninhibited access to both western consumer goods and cultural products. In the literary and

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<sup>28</sup> Aleksandar Hemon, “The Freedom Not to Choose,” interview by Mirna Skrbić, *Transitions Online*, December 22, 2004, <http://www.tol.org/client/article/13204-the-freedom-not-to-choose.html> [accessed July 30, 2011].

<sup>29</sup> Jasmina Lukić, “Pisanje kao antipolitika,” *Reč* 64, no. 10 (December 2001): 101; Slavenka Drakulić, “Intelektualci kao loši momci,” *Sarajevske sveske* 4 (2003): 75.

<sup>30</sup> Lukić, “Pisanje kao antipolitika,” 101. Serbian: “Rat je doveo pisce na prostorima nekadašnje Jugoslavije upravo u onu poziciju koju su oni sami pre toga pripisivali drugima, ‘istočnoevropskim piscima,’ među koje sebe po pravilu nisu ubrajali.”

cultural sphere, the Yugoslav Communist Party used the large autonomy enjoyed by writers and other cultural producers to show how different Yugoslav communism was to its more doctrinal variants to the east. While the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union may have adopted Socialist Realism as official literary policy in 1951, Yugoslavia never endorsed nor produced what Adorno once sarcastically referred to as “boy meets tractor” literature.<sup>31</sup> Quite to the contrary, in 1952 the towering figure of Miroslav Krleža gave his famous address “On Cultural Freedom” to the third congress of the Yugoslav Writers’ Union. While Krleža never renounced “engaged” literature, as he made clear in a later interview, “if one writes a literary work, one needs to write artistically, what one writes must have literary value. If it doesn’t, then one’s work is in vain, irrespective of whether one is or isn’t engaged as a writer.”<sup>32</sup>

Given this situation, there was never any real split between official and unofficial culture, nor did censorship at home give birth to famous émigré presses abroad such as Zdena Salivarová and Josef Škvorecký’s Toronto-based 68 Publishers. Very little was written “for the drawer,” and the country never witnessed a case similar to that of East German troubadour Wolf Biermann, who, given official permission to tour West Germany in 1976, was stripped of his GDR citizenship while away. Certainly because he never had the literary talent of Miłosz, and probably because he never quite managed to wash the wartime blood from his hands, Milovan Đilas, the most well-known Yugoslav communist-turned-

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<sup>31</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Reconciliation Under Duress,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Theodor Adorno et al (London: Verso, 2007), 173.

<sup>32</sup> Predrag Matvejević, *Razgovori s Krležom* (Zagreb: Prometej, 2001), 131. Croatian: “ako netko piše književno djelo, neka piše artistički, to što piše mora imati književne vrijednosti. Ako ih nema, uzaludan mu je posao, bez obzira na to je li ili nije angažiran kao pisac.”

dissident, never drew the same amount of western sympathy. For complex reasons related to the country's "soft communism" and the support this apparent third way enjoyed among the western left, "rock star" dissidents in the mould of Václav Havel, Milan Kundera, or Joseph Brodsky were never produced by, or for, Yugoslavia. In short, in the time of the Cold War, Yugoslavia exported *Gastarbeiter* to build highways and participate in economic miracles, not dissident writers and intellectuals. Speaking for many Yugoslav writers of his and Ugrešić's generation, Slovenian poet Aleš Debeljak framed things this way:

It was, of course, not a time of absolute freedom. But the space for public debate was open. As opposed to the Stalinism from the time before our intellectual maturity, there were almost no ideological taboos. There was no longer a censor looking over our shoulders, and black lists of proscribed writers almost completely disappeared. This is why the eternal need to write Aesopian tales and coded metaphors vanished as well. Young writers in Zagreb, Ljubljana and Belgrade were independently coming to the same conclusion: our priority lay in personal mythologies and the existential drama between I and thou.<sup>33</sup>

When Yugoslavia was torn apart by nationalist ambitions, "patriotic writers" (of which there were many) were, as Ugrešić writes, called upon to retrospectively demonize the country in which they had lived, develop false memory syndrome, and somehow transform themselves into victims of communist repression. And in this respect, such writers could only envy their Russian, Czech, Polish, Hungarian and other east European colleagues who were able to boast both a history of political emigration and an intellectual underground.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Aleš Debeljak, *Twilight of the Idols: Recollections of a Lost Yugoslavia: An Essay*, trans. Michael Biggins (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 1995), 67.

<sup>34</sup> See Ugrešić, *Nobody's Home*, 165; 266. (*Nikog nema doma*, 221; 238.)

It would, however, be wrong to suggest that the Yugoslav literary and cultural space was ever completely free from political interference. While the Ministries of Culture in other east European countries laid down clear diktats regarding literature's content and form, Yugoslav cultural policy was more along the lines of *we won't tell you what to write, but we'll let you know when you've written something you shouldn't have*.<sup>35</sup> Particularly in the years following the Second World War (and Tito's historic "No" to Stalin in 1948) many writers and intellectuals were incarcerated in a concentration camp located on an island off the Croatian coast called Goli otok (literally "barren island"), the Serb Dragoslav Mihailović being its most famous literary inmates.<sup>36</sup> In the 1960s the *Crni val* ("Black Wave") filmmakers faced ongoing censorship and, in the case of Dušan Makavejev, exile, for what amounted to "spreading defeatism."<sup>37</sup> And although the events of the 1971 Croatian Spring—a popular movement demanding greater linguistic and cultural autonomy—were hardly analogous to Prague in 1968 as Croatian nationalists have in retrospect claimed<sup>38</sup> (there were no Croatian Jan Palachs), the Yugoslav authorities certainly overreacted in its suppression. Even after Tito's death in 1980, Slovenian art-rock ensemble,

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<sup>35</sup> The other point to make here is that even if a book was banned (or more commonly, withdrawn following publication) in one republic, it didn't necessarily follow that the book would then also be banned and therefore unavailable in other republics.

<sup>36</sup> The cases of Mihailović and other incarcerated writers are well documented in Harold B. Segel, *The Columbia Literary History of Eastern Europe since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 160-69. Here it is important to note that those who ended up on Goli otok were generally sent there as alleged Stalinists who opposed Tito's split with the Soviet Union in 1948. In this sense Goli otok was a "school" to turn headline Stalinists into Yugoslav "soft communists," not to re-educate anti-communist dissidents.

<sup>37</sup> Generally speaking, given Tito's personal interest in cinema (particularly the production of "nation-building" Partisan epics) and the ability of film to reach mass audiences, the Yugoslav authorities monitored film production far more closely than literary and other cultural production.

<sup>38</sup> This rather disingenuous connection is made by several contributors to Dubravka Oraić-Tolić, ed., *Hrvatsko ratno pismo 1991/2: apeli, iskazi, pjesme* (Zagreb: Zavod za znanost o književnosti Filozofskoga fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 1992). The Croatian Spring was more nationalist than anti-communist in orientation.

Laibach, would for at least the first half of the decade face a ban on their name and associated iconography—Laibach being the German name for the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.5 “If life had to write novels, there wouldn’t be any”

Ugrešić began her studies in Russian and Comparative Literature at the University of Zagreb in the late-sixties, a time when both Russian formalism and French structuralism and their respective dogmas on the autonomy of literature had begun to find welcoming recipients in local literary circles. This exposure to formalist theories and the Russian avant-garde later provided her with both a scholarly area of interest—she was employed at the University of Zagreb’s Institute for the Theory of Literature for twenty years—and a kind of literary theology on the non-referentiality of literature that she soon put into practice in her own fiction.<sup>40</sup>

Ugrešić’s first work for adults, a collection of three stories, was tellingly entitled *Poza za prozu* (1978, *A Pose for Prose*),<sup>41</sup> its opening piece “Love Story” narrated

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, the entry on Laibach in Iris Andrić, Vladimir Arsenijević, Đorđe Matić, eds., *Leksikon YU Mitologije* (Belgrade: Rende; Zagreb: Postscriptum, 2004), 216-220.

<sup>40</sup> For a comprehensive overview of Ugrešić’s scholarly and literary career in the former Yugoslavia see Celia Hawkesworth, “Dubravka Ugrešić: The Insider’s Story,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 68, no. 3 (1990): 436-46; Andrew Wachtel, foreword to Dubravka Ugrešić, *In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth and Michael Henry Heim (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993); Jasmina Lukić, “Trivial Romance as an Archetypal Genre: The Fiction of Dubravka Ugrešić,” *Women’s Studies Journal Selected Papers*, Anniversary Issue 1992-2000, and “Witches Fly High: The Sweeping Broom of Dubravka Ugrešić,” *The European Journal of Women’s Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999): 385-93; and Dubravka Ugrešić, “Scholarship and Art,” interview by Priscilla Meyer, *Crosscurrents* 12 (1993): 189-203. In Croatian also see Velid Đekić, *Flagusova rukavica* (Rijeka: Naklada Benja, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Poza za prozu* (Zagreb: CDD, 1978; Zagreb: Konzor; Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2001). Of the three stories in the collection only “Love Story” has appeared in English, included in the collection *In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories*. The other two (untranslated) stories are “Ruške priče” (Russian stories) and “Vražja literatura” (The Devil’s literature).



by a besotted young female writer desperate to impress a certain Bublik, a self-professed writer with a non-existent oeuvre, whom she has decided is Mr. Right. The story's conceit sees the narrator writing various "prose proposals" in different literary styles, trying to win Bublik's attention, while simultaneously providing us, the reader, with a running metacommentary on the mercurial Bublik's rejection of these endeavours.

In her next work, the short novel *Štefica cvek u raljama života* (1981, *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*),<sup>42</sup> Ugrešić takes Proust's suggestion that a literary work is sewn like a dress to its logical conclusion. Subtitled "A Patchwork Novel," it begins with a key to the various sewing techniques with which reader and author will jointly stitch the work together. Throughout the narrative readers are, among other procedures, invited to cut, stretch, take in, pleat, smock, and even create "metatextual knots." The selected plot or "material" for the novel is provided by an advert placed in a Lonely Hearts column by a klutzy young Zagreb typist. While plunging her reader into the lowbrow world of women's magazines and the dwarf dramas of failed romance, Ugrešić nevertheless shoots her material through with intertextual references to Bruno Schulz, Bohumil Hrabal, Jaroslav Hašek, and most compellingly, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. In doing so, Ugrešić indulges in the classic postmodernist ruse of collapsing the worlds of low and high culture, but, as is inevitably the case, the trick is performed exclusively for the reader who gets the references.

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<sup>42</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Štefica Cvek u raljama života* (Zagreb: GZH, 1981; Zagreb: Konzor; Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2001); trans. Celia Hawkesworth and Michael Henry Heim (revised by Damion Searles) as "Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life," in *Lend Me Your Character* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005).

Depending on one's point of view, Ugrešić reached the height of her postmodern seriousness—or silliness—with her collection *Život je bajka* (1983, *Life Is a Fairytale*).<sup>43</sup> In the concluding “*De l’horrible danger de la lecture* (author’s notes)” in the book’s most recent English translation, Ugrešić explains the collection’s conceit: “I wrote six stories by altering other stories: copying someone else’s story and interpolating my own text, or writing my own story and interpolating someone else’s text, or writing someone else’s text and interpolating my own story, or letting someone else’s text write me.”<sup>44</sup> The interpolated stories in question include Gogol’s “The Nose” (in Ugrešić’s version, “Hot Dog in a Warm Bun,”<sup>45</sup> a lost penis found in a hot dog bun is substituted for the lost nose), Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, André Gide’s *Marshlands*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, as well as a Kafkaesque caper about a would-be translator of Russian avant-garde writer, Daniil Kharms. In the updated and revised “Author’s Notes” accompanying the collection’s re-publication in Croatian in 2001 and in English in 2005, Ugrešić notes that in 1983, when the collection first came out, the term “postmodernism” had only recently entered circulation in Yugoslav literary life. Only half-understanding what the new *-ism* was all about, reviewers apparently labelled the collection a “typical ‘postmodern construct,’”<sup>46</sup> which as she wryly suggests, “was merely a polite phrase for plagiarism.”<sup>47</sup> In an observation alluded to in the previous chapter, one making manifest her belief in Borges’s infinite

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<sup>43</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Život je bajka* (Zagreb: GZH, 1983; Zagreb: Konzor; Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2001). The stories from this collection first appeared in English translation as part of *In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories* and were republished (in revised translations) in *Lend Me Your Character*.

<sup>44</sup> Ugrešić, *Lend Me Your Character*, 234. (The sentence does not appear in the “Author’s Notes” in the 2001 Croatian edition.)

<sup>45</sup> See Lauren Lydić, “‘Noseological’ Parody, Gender Discourse, and Yugoslav Feminisms: Following Gogol’s ‘Nose’ to Ugrešić’s ‘Hot Dog on a Warm Bun,’” *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 161-78.

<sup>46</sup> Ugrešić, *Lend Me Your Character*, 233. Croatian: “tipičan postmodernistički ‘uradak” (130).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* Croatian: “što je bio tek ljubazan sinonim za plagijat.”

Library of Babel, Ugrešić writes that the chief difficulty in the collection's reception was due to the fact that

[i]n a literary milieu that takes for granted that literature grows out of real life it was not easy to drive home the simple idea that literature grows out of literature. Books have always had their roots in other books, and they still do. If life had to write novels, there wouldn't be any.<sup>48</sup>

As Zoran Milutinović contends, in the cultural détente of Yugoslavia in the 1980s, the politically critical intelligentsia used the tenets of the autonomy and non-referentiality of literature to defend political literature by, quite disingenuously, asserting that literature could not be political.<sup>49</sup> While Ugrešić's status as a popular and award-winning writer certainly made her part of the country's "intelligentsia," her *l'art pour l'art* ethics were never in question, her final work of fiction before the Yugoslav wars being the aforementioned *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, a witty farce set at a literary conference in Zagreb. In an April 1993 afterword to the novel's American edition, Ugrešić reflected on the dramatic changes since the novel's original publication. She confesses to now only being able to imagine one of her characters, Pipo Fink (a poetaster who longed to escape his "minor" life in Zagreb for a "major" life elsewhere), as a refugee in Amsterdam, or in the New York of his dreams—but only as a character in a clichéd story of east European exile. In one of life's sudden ironies, by September of 1993 Ugrešić found herself in political exile in western Europe, involuntarily cast in the clichéd role of east European writer fleeing a repressive

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "U književnoj sredini koja drži da prave knjige *nastaju iz života* nije lako probiti jednostavnu ideju da knjige *nastaju iz književnosti*. Knjige su nastajale i nastaju iz književnosti, uvijek. Jer da život zaista *piše* romane, književnosti ne bi bilo."

<sup>49</sup> See Zoran Milutinović, "Mimesis under Socialism," *Essays in Poetics* 24 (1999): 203.

regime. With customary self-deprecation, Ugrešić would some years later concede that this rapid turn of events had severely undermined her literary self-confidence, for it had turned out that life sometimes really did write books—and often with much greater skill than any author.<sup>50</sup>

## 2.6 “EEW” (East European Writer)

Ugrešić scholars have made much of the caesura that the Yugoslav wars represent in her literary oeuvre, her recourse to the essay genre being the most obvious and direct result of the rupture. However, a closer examination of the relationship between her “before” and “after” output reveals a more complex pattern of continuity and discontinuity. Jasmina Lukić suggests that the Yugoslav wars split Ugrešić’s literary career in two,<sup>51</sup> and although Lukić’s claim certainly has merit in the sense that Ugrešić’s essays represented her first (and quite unexpected) direct foray into the social and cultural politics of the former Yugoslavia,<sup>52</sup> Andrea Zlatar rightly contends that there is an internal poetic continuity between Ugrešić’s “before” and “after” writing.<sup>53</sup> In this regard one can certainly point to the fact that Ugrešić’s essays maintain the interest in the trivial and the commonplace that marked her earlier fiction—the banal evil of provincial warlords, the nationalist kitsch of their intellectual sponsors, and the *poshlost*’ of the fledgling ruling elite having replaced the personal soap operas of

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<sup>50</sup> The concession is made in an afterword written in 1998 and eventually included in the 2001 post-Yugoslav edition of the novel. See Ugrešić, *Forsiranje romana-reke*, 221-2.

<sup>51</sup> Lukić, “Pisanje kao antipolitika,” 73.

<sup>52</sup> In this regard Velimir Visković writes: “She was not interested in politics at all; in almost two decades of associating with her I don’t remember that she ever started a conversation on that theme.” Velimir Visković, “About Dubravka Ugrešić,” trans. Miljenko Kovačićek, *Relations* 1-2 (2004): 129.

<sup>53</sup> Andrea Zlatar, *Tekst, tijelo, trauma: ogledi o suvremenoj ženskoj književnosti* (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2004), 123.

her Hrabalian “little people.”<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, while Ugrešić was once a writer of witty and ironic postmodern metafiction, her post-Yugoslav literary output is characterised by an unprecedented engagement in politics, a palpable bitterness at the national homogenization of each of the individual Yugoslav peoples, and a deeply-felt nostalgia provoked by the “confiscation of memory” and almost total loss of the world of yesterday.

Although *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* was accepted for publication by noted British feminist publisher Virago Press well before the Yugoslav wars, it didn’t appear in English translation until 1991, the same year images of a detonated Vukovar and burning Dubrovnik were broadcast around the world. While containing thoughtful observations on the misunderstandings between “easterners” and “westerners,” the novel can in no way be read as “political” or “engaged” fiction. It is, rather, playfully postmodern, containing overt citations and intertextual references, parody, metafictional techniques such as a novel-within-the-novel, not to mention much metacommentary on the process of writing. In the shadow of the Yugoslav wars, however, aspects of the novel’s foreign reception served as unfortunate confirmation of many east European writers’ longheld fears that in the literary republic’s division of labour, they would only ever be considered for work on the political pole. Moreover, this reception illustrated an unfortunate continuity in the nature of western interest in literature from behind the Iron Curtain to that of the former Yugoslavia as the country ruptured.

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<sup>54</sup> A similar point is made in Teofil Pančić, “Fircanje Teksta (i Sveta),” in *Famoznih 400 kilometara* (Zagreb: V.B.Z., 2007), 47.

In an essay entitled “EEW” (short for “East European Writer”), Ugrešić recalls several conversations with American publishers while “shopping” the novel in the early 1990s:

“The American market is saturated with East European writers,” an editor in one publishing house told me.

“Oh?” I said.

“I personally don’t intend to print a single one,” he said.

“But what has that got to do with my books,” I said, stressing the word books.

“You are an East European writer,” he replied, stressing every word.

“It’s a real shame you’re not a Cuban writer,” the editor of another publishing house told me, with feeling.

“Oh?”

“At present the American market is open to ethnicities, particularly Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Central America in general.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“Have you any connection to China?”

“No.”

“Pity. That would have helped. The Chinese immigrant novel, that’s fashionable now.”

“Unfortunately we can’t publish your books at the moment,” the editor of a third publishing house told me, with a note of real regret in his voice. “You write, how can I put it, ‘pure’ literature. From a moral standpoint it would not be right to publish something like that, now that your country is at war . . . Have you anything about the war?”<sup>55</sup>

Or let us take Ugrešić’s recollection of an interview with an American journalist:

“What do you think about communism?” an American journalist asked me. “I know, it must have been terrible,” she said emotionally, screwing up her face, “but in a transitional period the phenomenon itself seeks re-articulation . . .”

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<sup>55</sup> Ugrešić, *Have a Nice Day*, 141; *Američki fikcionar*, 114.

I listened to her, not believing my ears. How did she know it was terrible, and how easily all those words: communism, transition, postcommunism, tripped off her tongue.

"I'm not a politician, I'm a writer," I said.

"I'm asking you because you're a writer, an intellectual, a representative of a postcommunist country . . ."

God, I thought, if she only knew that in my country writers, taking on the role of politicians, were as responsible for the war as the generals, because when they were asked the same questions they were only too eager to answer.

"We're talking about literature," I said.

"Let's leave boring questions about literature to Western writers. As an East European writer and intellectual you surely have far more interesting things to talk about than literature."<sup>56</sup>

In an essay from *The Culture of Lies*, Ugrešić outlines the responses of three western European critics to *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*. The first praises her literary firepower, yet feels the need to ask whether it is "what we really need." In Ugrešić's interpretation, what the critic meant to say was that while the novel had literary value, his disappointment lay in its failure to match his predetermined expectations of a novel from the Balkans. A second reviewer, forgetting to check the novel's original date of publication, accused her of writing satirical novels while her country was "swimming in blood." The third reviewer concurred with the first about the novel's literary merits, but bemoaned the "bad timing" of its publication. Finally, as Ugrešić notes with more than a little mirth, having read the novel, a friendly western editor, with the best of intentions, suggested she write a book about "a) the origins of Yugoslavia; b) the history of the country's disintegration; c) the essence of the bloody conflict."<sup>57</sup> At this point it might be instructive to consider the likelihood of similar reactions to a new Philip Roth or Julian Barnes novel unfortunately published as "their countries"

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 139; 112-13.

<sup>57</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 168. Croatian: "a) nastanak Jugoslavije; b) povijest raspada; c) bit krvavog sukoba" (216).

engaged in bloody wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

In and of itself, this brief sketch hardly constitutes a body of empirical evidence confirming the existence of an official “division of labour” in the world of letters. Yet it does appear to offer unfortunate confirmation that as a writer from a small nation, and an east European writer in the West, Ugrešić can only achieve recognition on the international stage if she consents to being a “politico-literary” spokesperson for her nation and *ipso facto*, a representative of her national literature. It goes without saying that this is a demand which has long ceased to be made of writers in the liberal democracies of the West in which “true” literature is understood as being “autonomous” or “pure”—beyond history and above politics. On the other hand, as will become later apparent, at “home” Ugrešić’s passage from being a writer of witty and ironic metafiction—for which she was celebrated—to a writer who tried to reconcile literariness with ethical engagement, saw her disowned by her newfound national milieu, and therefore, national literature. Ugrešić has often reflected on the paradox, perhaps never more wittily than in her 2005 collection *Nobody’s Home*:

With impassioned, Eurosong-like glee, the rest of the world identified me as a *Croatian* writer. I became a literary representative of a place that no longer wanted me. I, too, no longer wanted the place that no longer wanted me. I am no fan of unrequited love. Even today, I still, however, haven’t shaken free of the labels.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ugrešić, *Nobody’s Home*, 143. Croatian: “U svijetu su me s nekim navijačkim Eurosong veseljem identificirali kao *hrvatsku* spisateljicu. Postala sam književna predstavica sredine koja me više nije htjela. Ni ja više nisam htjela sredinu koja me nije htjela, ne vjerujem u ljubav bez reciprociteta. Etikete se, međutim, nisam riješila” (184).



The larger point to make here is that while those inclined to believe that national literatures are “finished” undoubtedly have a multitude of theoretical and academic discourses at their disposal, the significance of these discourses—of globalism and globalisation, of diaspora and nomadism, of postnational units and transnational flows—depends heavily on where one is leaning out the window and sniffing the air around oneself. The contours of the World Republic of Letters look remarkably different when viewed from Warsaw, Ljubljana, or Zagreb, than from London, New York, or Toronto. As Mexican Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz noted, “people of the fringes, inhabitants of the suburbs of history,”<sup>59</sup> tend to see things rather differently from those in the metropolis. While those privileged enough to live in worlds exclusively inhabited by Pico Iyer-like “global souls” and Rushdie-like international “mongrels” may wish to write off the east European experience in the literary republic as some kind of aberration, many writers from small nations—at least those with a sense of humour—would likely agree with the contention of a Latvian brother of the pen invented by Ugrešić in *Nobody’s Home* that “[a] writer without a people is like shit in the rain.”<sup>60</sup>

## 2.7 The Émigré Writer and the Archive

Beyond the borders of the former Yugoslavia it is often overlooked that Ugrešić had a well-established literary career before the country’s disintegration. Her children’s books were on school reading lists, the novella *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* had in 1984 been made into a hugely popular film, she was well-

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<sup>59</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, trans. Lysander Kemp (London: Penguin, 1967); quoted in Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. Debevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 82.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Ugrešić, *Nobody’s Home*, 152; *Nikog nema doma*, 193.

established as a scholar, and in 1988 *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* had won Yugoslavia's premier literary prize. As Velimir Visković suggests, had she responded to the nationalist bugle call and “pronounced a few ritualistic patriotic phrases welcoming the formation of the young Croatian state and its democratic leadership,”<sup>61</sup> she would have avoided both the wrath and ritual adoration of the new authorities, who had little use for her postmodern literary games. Having hitherto shown little interest in politics, Ugrešić perilously proceeded to write a series of scathing essays published in prestigious European media.

In his 2002 novel *Ignorance*, Milan Kundera declared that, 200 years after the French Revolution, the fall of the Berlin Wall “took the Émigré off the set of The History of the Europeans.”<sup>62</sup> While Kundera's rhetorical flourish is gorgeous, he was also quite wrong. In the final decade of the twentieth century, overshadowed by the euphoria of Europe's reunification, Ugrešić was one of a diverse group of cultural figures from all over the former Yugoslavia who fled abroad, unable or unwilling to reconcile themselves to life in their new nation statelets. Excavating the dark loam of literary and extraliterary archives—journalistic reports and feuilletons, letters to editors and responses to online forums, scholarly articles and (post-independence) histories of Croatian literature—the following narrative attempts to reconstruct the circumstances in which Ugrešić, exhausted by the media witch-hunt against her, literally and metaphorically flew from Croatia.

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<sup>61</sup> Visković, “About Dubravka Ugrešić,” 130.

<sup>62</sup> Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 2003 [2002]), 30. French: “a fait sortir l'Émigré de la scène de l'histoire des Européens.” *L'Ignorance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 33.

In the process of this reconstruction, it quickly becomes apparent that the archive's theoretical problem is one of teleology. Although Michel Foucault may have been right when he wrote that "the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive . . . belongs to our modernity,"<sup>63</sup> he is less forthcoming on how any such archive might actually be used. The problem is no less apparent when dealing with an archive of a more modest ambition and size. While archives are often thought of as having immense manipulative value—hence the race for access—in the case of Ugrešić and the Croatian milieu, all evidence suggests that manipulation occurs much more by the addition of new documents than by the forced disappearance of old ones. Those in Croatia wishing to organise forgetting of the actual circumstances of Ugrešić's "voluntary" exile from Croatia have tended to laconically ignore any contrary or (self)incriminating archival document. In this scenario, the metaphor of the palimpsest that so often accompanies the writing of (literary) history is an unhelpful one, for it suggests a writing over. More helpful is the very literal image of death by burial—of newer, weightier documents being piled high and wide over older ones.

In keeping with the ideas of Prague and Konstanz School theorists, those who have contributed to the Ugrešić archive form a significant object of the "organised remembering" that follows, their group portrait illustrating the chaotic and indeed schizophrenic nature of the post-Yugoslav cultural space. In denying the organisers of forgetting entry to the "laboratories [of the past]

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<sup>63</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, trans. Jay Miskowiec (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 234.

where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories re-written,”<sup>64</sup> my investigation is, at least in part, aimed at thwarting the self-rehabilitation of those who engineered the cultural excommunication, public execution, and finally exile of the relatively few Croatian intellectuals who courageously defended Europe’s better idea. Finally, it is an attempt to locate the position of the émigré writer within the ongoing *Kulturkampf* in post-independence Croatia. In the clearing of exile, the émigré writer, exposed and with few defenders of his or her own, remains extremely lonely and vulnerable to fire from both sides of the battle lines.

## 2.8. “Clean Croatian Air”

In October of 1992 an Ugrešić essay entitled “Saubere Kroatische Luft” (“Clean Croatian Air”) appeared in the German weekly *Die Zeit*.<sup>65</sup> The brief piece, a Barthesian deconstruction of Coca-Cola-like cans bearing the red and white Croatian coat of arms and the slogan “Clean Croatian Air,” tracks how this innocuous piece of nationalist kitsch, which appeared in Zagreb kiosks following the first multi-party elections in 1990, signalled the beginning of a far more sinister discourse based on a clean/dirty dichotomy. Citing a well-known public figure’s assertion that “[e]veryone knows there hasn’t been any Byzantine blood in my family for three hundred years,”<sup>66</sup> and Croatian President Franjo Tuđman’s

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<sup>64</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Penguin, 1983), 22.

<sup>65</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, “Saubere kroatische Luft,” *Die Zeit*, October 23, 1992, *Zeit.de*, <http://www.zeit.de/1992/44/saubere-kroatische-luft> [accessed 30 July 2011]. The essay was republished in the *Independent on Sunday* of December 6, 1992 as “Dirty Tyranny of Mr Clean,” and finally appeared in Croatian in *The Culture of Lies* as “Analysis of a Little Text,” (59-63) (and in *Kultura laži* as “Analiza jednog malog teksta,” 80-84).

<sup>66</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 60. Croatian: “‘Svima je poznato da u mojoj obitelji već tristo godina nije bilo bizantijske krvi’” (80).

own haymaker that he was proud that his wife was neither a Serb nor a Jew,<sup>67</sup> Ugrešić notes that proving and publicly declaring the purity of one's bloodlines soon became a national obsession. As Ugrešić suggests, in the former comment "Byzantine" functions as a euphemism for "Serb," and in the new clean/dirty linguistic and ideological value system "Byzantine" is the most dangerous of pollutants.<sup>68</sup>

Underlining that the cans of "Clean Croatian Air" had been ridiculed in local newspaper commentary long before Ugrešić's essay appeared in *Die Zeit*, Boris Mikulić reveals the hypocrisy of the backlash against Ugrešić. As he writes, "[i]t was as if that 'Croatian tin can,' an object of allegedly benign Croatian normality, commonplace folklore in pop-culture form, only became visible when spotted from the backyard of a better European neighbour!"<sup>69</sup> Criticism of the same phenomenon published in the Croatian media could be laughed off with casual dismissal that the cans were just "naše gluposti," a catch-all phrase essentially meaning "our [Croatian] monkey business," an innocent or even endearing foible. However, for airing the dirty laundry abroad, Ugrešić, "[w]ith her melancholic doubt in the civilisational significance of the new-Croatian ideological kitsch

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<sup>67</sup> Hawkesworth cites Croatian Jewish historian, Ivo Goldstein, that Tuđman's exact words were "some say that my wife is Serbian or Jewish—I am happy to say that she is neither Serbian nor Jewish." Celia Hawkesworth, *Zagreb: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 201.

<sup>68</sup> The use of Byzantium as a synonym for the uncivilised other is by no means an exclusively Croatian invention. Miłosz, for example, writes that a Pole is taught from childhood that, "his country belongs to a civilization that has been derived from Rome rather than Byzantium." Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage, 1990), 18.

<sup>69</sup> Boris Mikulić, "Ministarstvo književnosti 2001. ili 11 teza o nelagodi u demokratskoj kulturi" [Ministry of Literature 2001, or 11 Theses on the Malaise in Democratic Culture], <http://deenes.ffzg.hr/~bmikulic/Knjizevnost/11teza.htm> [accessed 30 July 2011]. Croatian: "Kao da je ta 'hrvatska limenka,' komad navodno benigne hrvatske normalnosti, običan folklor u pop-kulturnoj formi, postala vidljivom tek kad je na nju bačen pogled iz dvorišta boljeg, evropskog susjeda!"

denounced herself as a recidivist of Croatian Yugoslavism and—so to speak, condemned herself to a stoning.”<sup>70</sup> As Mikulić eloquently puts it, what ensued was “a disgraceful pogrom by the literati against one of its members who didn’t want to participate in the new happiness, but to remain a writer, chose the unhappiness of loneliness.”<sup>71</sup>

Among the first reactions to “Clean Croatian Air” was that of a journalist named Hloverka Novak-Srzić (to whom I shall return) in an article entitled “Denunciranje domovine” (“Denouncing the Homeland”), published November 9, 1992. It opened with the question “What is Dubravka Ugrešić by nationality?” and went on to accuse her of “denouncing, accusing, and openly lying” because of her “brutally crushed dreams of the eternity of Yugoslavia (that is, Serboslavia).”<sup>72</sup> Ugrešić’s essay also drew a withering response from one of Croatia’s then most esteemed living writers, the relatively moderate Antun Šoljan, who was at the time dying of cancer.<sup>73</sup> In an opinion piece entitled “Dubravka Cvek u raljama rata” (“Dubravka Cvek in the Jaws of War,” a play on the title of Ugrešić’s aforementioned novella) published in a regime-loyal daily, Šoljan describes Ugrešić as being “a true child of communism [who] it appears,

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “svojom melankoličnom sumnjom u civilizacijsko značenje novohrvatskog ideološkoga kiča prokazala kao recediv hrvatskog jugoslavenstva i – takoreći, osudila samu sebe na kamenovanje.”

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “sramotni pogrom književnog ceha protiv članice koja ne želi sudjelovati u novoj sreći nego, da bi ostala književnica, bira nesreću samoće.”

<sup>72</sup> Hloverka Novak-Srzić, “Denunciranje domovine” [“Denouncing the Homeland”], *Glasnik*, November 9, 1992. The first reaction I have found was published a day previously, see Gojko Borić, “Hrvatska na izvrnut način” [“Croatia Turned Inside Out”], *Slobodna Dalmacija*, November 8, 1992. *Inter alia*, Borić accuses Ugrešić of being “a Yugonostalgic,” “a national Daltonist,” and “a salon intellectual.”

<sup>73</sup> Hawkesworth writes that Šoljan’s work serves “as a useful barometer of gradually shifting attitudes to the second Yugoslavia,” conveying “a steady loss of belief in the project, presented with humour and wit, and tinged with regret.” *Zagreb: A Cultural History*, 154.

doesn't believe in democracy."<sup>74</sup> In a rhetorical outburst from which others would soon draw inspiration, with feigned reluctance Šoljan then goes on to count Ugrešić "among that group of exalted 'daughters of the revolution,' former media stars of the leftist hemisphere, who are unable to come to terms with the fall of the old order and their cosy little spot within it."<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, Šoljan sent his piece to *Die Zeit* for publication, but it was rejected on the grounds that it was clearly written for a domestic (Croatian) audience, and not appropriate for a German readership.<sup>76</sup> As a mere prelude to the louder cacophony that would soon follow, Šoljan's attack is barely recorded in Ugrešić scholarship, buried beneath the blaze of the media spectacle that became known as the "Witches of Rio" affair barely a month later.

## 2.9 "The Witches of Rio"

Hawkesworth notes that over 140 "witches" were tortured and burned in Zagreb between 1360 and 1751, the overwhelming majority in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In addition to documentary evidence in the Museum of the City of Zagreb, the practice was chronicled in a cycle of novels entitled *Grička vještica* (The witch of Grič) by Marija Jurić Zagorka (ca 1876-1957), one of the first Croatian women of letters who, as Hawkesworth notes, was then subjected to insulting and threatening phone calls, and accused of inventing the whole

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<sup>74</sup> Antun Šoljan, "Dubravka Cvek u raljama rata," *Večernji list*, November 11, 1992. Croatian: "pravo dijete komunizma" [who] "vidi se, ne vjeruje u demokraciju."

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "u onu družinu egzaltiranih 'kćeri revolucije' bivših medijskih zvijezda lijeve hemisfere, koje ne mogu prežaliti propali poredak i svoje komotno mjestašce u njemu."

<sup>76</sup> This rejection was widely reported and unsurprisingly fed Croatian claims of a western conspiracy against the country. See, for example, Anonymous, "Ugrešićka može, Šoljan ne može" ["Ugrešić's Allowed, Šoljan Isn't"], *Danas*, January 8, 1993; Valent Livadić, "Žensko 'disidentstvo' i njihova 'jedina istina'" ["Female 'Dissidentism' and their 'Single Truth'"], *Slavonski magazin*, July 15, 1993; Ivo Zanić, "Nema više polunašeg" ["There's No More Half-Ours"], *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, November 18, 1992.

phenomenon in order to advance her career.<sup>77</sup> It requires no great leap of the imagination to see the unfortunate continuity between the historical burning of witches in Zagreb, the attacks on Jurić Zagorka, and the media bonfires lit beneath the five new Croatian “witches” in late 1992.

Despite the fact that a number of scholarly and journalistic accounts of the “Witches of Rio” affair exist in both Croatian and English,<sup>78</sup> and that in a recent essay Ugrešić finally offered her own devastating account,<sup>79</sup> there are several reasons for me to provide a comprehensive synthesis here. Firstly, the affair and its ongoing repercussions represent the defining fiat that led to Ugrešić leaving Croatia permanently. Secondly, it remains an unfortunate fact that to this day the affair’s protagonists occupy prominent positions in Croatian national life, while for many Ugrešić remains the witch she was branded two decades ago. Over the years, some have engaged in a “retouching” of their involvement, while others remain unrepentant. Either way, the tremendous importance of the affair lies in the extent to which it demonstrates how little present-day Croatia, a country often touted as a role model for the region, has culturally changed since the “witch-hunting” season of the early 1990s.

The affair began on December 3, 1992, at the World PEN Congress in Rio de Janeiro, at which members of the American PEN delegation raised questions about media freedom, freedom of speech, and the blacklisting of politically

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<sup>77</sup> Hawkesworth, *Zagreb*, 6; 99-102.

<sup>78</sup> The original Croatian media stories and their English translations are archived at [http://www.women-war-memory.org/en/vjestice\\_iz\\_ria/](http://www.women-war-memory.org/en/vjestice_iz_ria/) [accessed 16 June 2011].

<sup>79</sup> See Dubravka Ugrešić, “Pitanje optike,” in *Napad na minibar* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga; Zagreb: Fraktura, 2010), 207-49; trans. David Williams as “A Question of Perspective,” in *Karaoke Culture* (Rochester, NY: Open Letter Books, 2011), 203-46.



unsuitable writers and intellectuals by Croatia's new democratic authorities. The thrust of these questions was whether the following year's World PEN congress should go ahead in Dubrovnik as planned—not least given that there was a war going on. Based on faxed reports sent from Rio to the Croatian Press Agency (later identified to have been written and disseminated by the head of the Croatian PEN association, Slobodan Prosperov Novak<sup>80</sup>), on December 5, 1992 three almost identical reports simultaneously appeared in two daily newspapers. The single signed report, by a journalist named Branka Kamenski (to whom I shall also return), spoke of a small group of “tired old feminists” who were trying to scuttle Dubrovnik's chances of holding the congress, naming them as journalists Vesna Kesić and Jelena Lovrić, journalist and writer Slavenka Drakulić, academic Rada Iveković, and Dubravka Ugrešić. As the article alleges, the women are motivated by vengeance against the new state of Croatia, which has put an end to the privilege and influence they enjoyed under the “Yugoslavism” of their “beloved Yugoslavia.”<sup>81</sup> The whole story was soon picked up by a prominent national weekly, *Globus*, which, as Ivica Đikić writes, “in

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<sup>80</sup> Prosperov Novak taught Croatian literature for many years at the University of Zagreb and between 1990–92 served as Deputy Minister of Culture. Not long after the “Witches of Rio” scandal he himself fell foul of the Tuđman regime. From 2001–5 he taught South Slavic Literature at Yale University, and today has teaching engagements at various institutions of higher education in Croatia. Asked at the time of the scandal whether he faxed the original reports from Rio, Prosperov Novak replied: “Only partly. I phoned from Rio, and I sent the fax. My colleagues composed a press release, sent it, and underlined that it is issued by Croatian PEN and that editors could do what they want with it.” Slobodan Prosperov Novak, “Kongres se ne može minirati” [“Congress Can't Be Mined”], interview by Renato Baretić, *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, December 9, 1992. Croatian: “Samo donekle. Ja sam se, naime, telefonom i faksom javio Tajništvu Hrvatskoga centra PEN-a, a kolege su onda sastavili malu promemoriju za tisak, s napomenom da je šalje tajništvo hrvatskog PEN-a, s kojom je onda svaka redakcija mogla činiti što je volja.”

<sup>81</sup> See Branka Kamenski, “Ćorak u Riu” [“Dud Bullet in Rio”], *Večernji list*, December 5, 1992. Kamenski's article was accompanied by an unsigned piece of commentary entitled “Lobistice promukla glasa” (“Lobbyists Lose Their Voice”). A further unsigned article entitled “Američki delegat ostao je usamljen” (“American Delegat Left on His Own”) appeared on the same day in the *Vjesnik* daily.

record time produced a hard-core version.”<sup>82</sup>

As a record of fact, it is crucial to note that at no time during the conference in Rio were the five women’s names publicly mentioned.<sup>83</sup> In her own account of the affair, Vesna Kesić maintains that the majority of reports filed in Croatian media about the conference in Rio “were high-flown praises of the president of Croatian PEN, Slobodan P. Novak, who, struggling with the multi-headed dragon of ‘malevolent and exaggerated doubts about the Croatian democracy’ managed to save the congress in Dubrovnik.”<sup>84</sup>

The *Globus* story, a lurid reportage simply attributed to “the *Globus* investigative team,” published on December 11, 1992 and entitled “Hrvatske feministice siluju Hrvatsku” (“Croatian Feminists Rape Croatia”),<sup>85</sup> is one of the most shameful episodes in the long catalogue of disgraceful journalism marking the reporting of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Quickly abandoning the relatively trivial matter of a literary conference, the article denounces the five women as “witches” and accuses them of “raping Croatia” by—as the article alleges—having deliberately concealed the rape of Muslim and Croatian women by Serb forces in Bosnia. Drakulić, Iveković, and Ugrešić are accused of selling “literary

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<sup>82</sup> Ivica Đikić, “Zastava za metenje,” *Feral Tribune*, September 21, 1998. Croatian: “u rekordnom roku proizveo hard-core verziju.”

<sup>83</sup> See Meredith Tax “Five Women Who Won’t Be Silenced: Croatia’s ‘Witches.’” *The Nation*, May 10, 1993. (“Those who were not in Rio should know that, when the delegate from PEN American Center expressed concern about holding a Congress in Dubrovnik, he did so in general human rights terms, referring to press censorship. He did not mention individuals. At no point were the names of these five women writers mentioned in public meetings in the Rio Congress.”)

<sup>84</sup> Vesna Kesić, “The High Price of Free Speech,” trans. Vinka Lyubimir, *Women’s Review of Books* 10, no. 10-11 (July 1993): 16-17 (16). A similar point is made in Boris Dežulović, “Dr. Prosperov i Mister Novak,” *Slobodna Dalmacija*, December 8, 1992.

<sup>85</sup> Globusov investigativni tim, “Hrvatske feministice siluju Hrvatsku,” *Globus*, December 11, 1992. It was later revealed that the story was written by Slaven Letica, a professor of sociology, who briefly served as Franjo Tuđman’s chief political advisor (1990–91). Throughout the 1990s Letica gained a wider public profile as a columnist and talkshow guest, and in 2000 contested the Croatian presidential election. From 2003 to 2007 he served as an MP for the far-right *Hrvatska stranka prava* (Croatian Party of Rights).

platitudes about the tragedy of war as men’s business and the thesis that on the territory of the former Yugoslavia it is not Croatian and Muslim women who are being raped, but rather WOMEN(!).<sup>86</sup> As the article alleges, the rest of the world media has taken the view that in Bosnia women are being raped not because they are women, but because they are “non-Ayran”—which readers are to understand as meaning “non-Serbian.” Implicitly, the article accuses the “witches” of being complicit in a war crime, the logic of the accusation made explicit by the *Globus* legal response to a defamation lawsuit brought by Ugrešić:

The complainant—who had access to the foreign media—made no contribution to informing the foreign public about the Serbian rape of Muslim and Croatian women. As the complainant was certainly aware of the facts of mass Serbian rapes and could have informed the foreign public and stir that public to action earlier, but didn’t do so, the defendant considers that in not doing so, she [the complainant] has actually committed an act of concealing Serb crimes.<sup>87</sup>

The following two extracts offer a further indication of the article’s general tone:

Almost without exception they were daughters of communism! Little girls from families of intelligence agents, police, prison guards, diplomats, high-ranking state and party bureaucrats. The few of them, who in spite of their theoretical positions and physical appearances managed to find a partner or husband, chose in accordance with Yugoslav [Communist Party] standards: Rada Iveković married a Serb from Belgrade, Slavenka Drakulić twice married Croatian Serbs, Jelena Lovrić a Croatian Serb. It would be immoral to mention were it not now clear that this is about

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 41. Croatian: “literarne floskule o tragičnosti rata kao muškog businessa i teze o tome kako se na prostoru bivše Jugoslavije ne siluju Hrvatice i Muslimanke nego ŽENE (!)”

<sup>87</sup> Cited in Đikić, “Zastava za metenje.” Croatian: “Tužiteljica—koja je imala pristup inozemnim medijima—nije pridonijela informiranju inozemne javnosti o srpskim silovanjima Muslimanki i Hrvatice. Kako je tužiteljica zasigurno bila upoznata s činjenicom masovnih srpskih silovanja i kako je mogla o tome informirati inozemnu javnost i ranije uzbuniti tu javnost, a to nije učinila, tuženik smatra da je nečinjenjem, zapravo, počinila djelo skrivanja srpskih zločina.”

systematic political choice, not coincidence in matters of the heart.<sup>88</sup>

The five witches who an unknown American in Rio wanted to transform into a group of anti-communist dissidents are not “cases” in any sense. These former profiteers of communism and postcommunism today write and publish more than ever before! But still they force their claim to the status of victim . . . Without this completely fabricated status, they would be exactly what they are: a group of selfish middle-aged women who have serious problems with their own ethnic, ethical, human, intellectual and political identity!<sup>89</sup>

The “*Globus* investigative team” suggests that under the influence of French feminist literature, the five (along with another twenty or so women) chose feminism as “their ‘fate,’ ideology, and profession”<sup>90</sup> as a result of their failure to find either a partner or a “real” area of academic interest; the movement to which they are alleged to belong characterised as a “well-organised intellectual sect.”<sup>91</sup> The article was crowned with a table containing the five women’s dates and places of birth, academic qualifications, ethnicities, professions, marital, familial, and employment statuses, details of real estate owned, periods spent abroad during the war, “anti-Croatian” quotes, and evidence (or lack thereof) of

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<sup>88</sup> Globusov investigativni tim, “Hrvatske feministice,” 42. Croatian: “Gotovo bez iznimke one su bile djevojčice komunizma! Djevojčice iz obitelji obavještajaca, policajaca, zatvorskih čuvara, diplomata, visokih državnih i partijskih činovnika. Ono malo među njima što je, kraj svoje teorijske pozicije i fizičkog izgleda, uspjelo pronaći životnog ili bračnog druga, izabralo je nešto po JUS-u: Srbina iz Beograda Rada Iveković, Srbina (dva puta) iz Hrvatske Slavenka Drakulić i Srbina iz Hrvatske Jelena Lovrić. To bi bilo nemoralno spominjati da nije, kad se sad pogleda ovako na okupu, posrijedi sistematski politički izbor, a ne slučajni izbor po ljubavnoj sklonosti!”

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Pet vještica koje nepoznati Amerikanac u Riu želi pretvoriti u skupinu antikomunističkih disidentkinja ni po čemu nisu ‘slučajevi.’ Bivše profiterke komunizma i postkomunizma danas više pišu i objavljuju nego što su to ikad prije radile! Ipak, silom traže status žrtve . . . Bez toga potpuno izmišljenog ‘statusa’ one bi bile ono što i jesu: skupina samoživih žena srednje dobi koja ima ozbiljnih problema s vlastitim etničkim, etičkim, ljudskim, intelektualnim i političkim identitetom.”

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “vlastitu ‘sudbinu’, ideologiju i profesiju.”

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “dobro organizirana intelektualna sekta.”

membership in the Yugoslav Communist Party.<sup>92</sup>

In the most lucid analysis of the gendered nature of the attacks, Jasmina Lukić suggests that they were carefully calibrated to appeal to the general public's sense of envy, portraying the women as enjoying a privileged social status in a time of widespread deprivation. Noting their addresses and size of their apartments in a country where many had lost or fled their homes, and that the women were gainfully employed in a country where many had lost their jobs, aimed for the same effect. As Lukić maintains, in a patriarchal society (or moreover, one undergoing repatriarchalisation) a woman's marital status, the nationality of her husband, and whether she has children, define a woman's identity—a "problematic" husband making the woman herself problematic, while being unmarried and/or childless made her an anomaly. These crucial gender aspects aside, Lukić nevertheless acknowledges that in a time of national homogenisation, the "witch-hunt" was part of a much wider climate of intolerance toward any kind of difference or dissent.<sup>93</sup>

As Ivica Đikić notes, the *Globus* article opened the doors to "a whole series of no less successful attacks by regime media against independent journalists, opposition politicians, supreme court judges, foreign foundations and disobedient artists,"<sup>94</sup> each new story an attempt to prove the author's love for the new state of Croatia and its government—understood by many as being one

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<sup>92</sup> Kesić underlines that only one of the five (Jelena Lovrić) was ever a member of the Yugoslav League of Communists—one in five being significantly lower than the national average—and suggests that "at least 95 percent of journalists, including Croatian ones (and editors and journalists at *Globus*), were 'communists.'" See Kesić, "High Price," 16.

<sup>93</sup> Lukić, "Pisanje kao antipolitka," 93.

<sup>94</sup> Đikić, "Zastava za metenje," 34. Croatian: "cijela serija ništa manje uspješnih hajki režimskih medija protiv nezavisnih novinara, opozicijskih političara, vrhovnih sudaca, inozemnih fondacija i neposlušnih umjetnika."

and the same. Within a year of the publication of “Croatian Feminists Rape Croatia,” four of the five “witches,” including Dubravka Ugrešić, had “voluntarily” chosen exile in western Europe. Interviewed about his role in the affair in 1998, Slaven Letica, who had been identified as the author of the article, implied that he had in fact helped the “witches” on their way to international fame.<sup>95</sup> Letica’s editor at *Globus*, Denis Kuljiš, is reported to have responded with a nonchalant “it was a mistake.”<sup>96</sup> And in a 2007 interview, Slobodan Prosperov Novak maintained that he had been dragged into the “absolutely real persecution” of the five against his will. Playing down the affair, he noted

[t]hat all this happened while would-be white knights slaughtered their way around Ahmići,<sup>97</sup> and other white knights stole money from the poor in Zagreb is hardly a coincidence. First and foremost we organised the [PEN] Congress to preserve the honour of Croatian civil society against low lifes, the disgraced honour of a country where the problem was no longer whether it lurched to the right or left, as was indiscriminately suggested, but rather the problem, which remains to this day, that it was sinking deeper and deeper.<sup>98</sup>

*The Culture of Lies* contains several sections in which Ugrešić alludes to Prosperov Novak’s role in events, the first relating to the actual PEN congress held in

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “bila je to greška.” Denis Kuljiš remains one of the most influential figures in the Croatian media and alongside acting as a PR adviser for politicians of all stripes throughout the former Yugoslavia, he still writes for *Globus*.

<sup>97</sup> Bosnian Croat forces massacred over 100 Bosnian Muslim civilians in the village of Ahmići on April 16, 1993. A number of those responsible have been successfully prosecuted at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

<sup>98</sup> Slobodan Prosperov Novak, “15 godina poslije,” interview, *Vijenac* 337, February 1, 2007, [http://www.matica.hr/Vijenac/vijenac337.nsf/AllWebDocs/15\\_godina\\_poslije](http://www.matica.hr/Vijenac/vijenac337.nsf/AllWebDocs/15_godina_poslije) [accessed 20 June 2011]. Croatian: “Što se sve to događalo dok su navodni vitezovi klali po Ahmićima, a drugi vitezovi pljačkali sirotinji novac po Zagrebu nije valjda slučajno. Kongres smo organizirali prije svega da bismo od protuha sačuvali obraz građanske Hrvatske, popljuvani obraz zemlje u kojoj više nije problem bio u tome da li je ona skrenula desno ili lijevo, kako se olako htjelo sugerirati, nego joj je problem u tom trenutku bio, a tako je i danas, u tome što je ona tonula sve dublje i dublje.”

Dubrovnik:

While the inhabitants of Sarajevo were dying, and the inhabitants of Dubrovnik were holding their breath as they listened attentively to the silence—a luxurious ship set sail for Dubrovnik from Venice. On the PEN-ship were writers from all over the world, the largest number being Croatian. The writers oiled their throats with Adriatic lobsters and wine while they prepared for the forthcoming verbal battle against fascism. The newspapers gave daily reports of their struggle on the sea, and later on dry land.<sup>99</sup>

In another essay entitled “Profession: Intellectual,” Ugrešić cites Prosperov Novak’s response to a journalist’s question about why there are no dissidents in Croatia: “It’s because we are all of us in fact in love with Croatia.”<sup>100</sup> She notes that while Prosperov Novak may well have thought he was protecting the few lone voices of dissent by claiming that all Croatian intellectuals were in love with Croatia, he was actually denying the possibility of individual choice in the matter. Furthermore, given Prosperov Novak’s then powerful position in the cultural sphere, Ugrešić suggests that his appeasement of what she calls the “Holy Majority” is essentially motivated by fear of separating himself from the safety of his local milieu. Calling that milieu to account for its shortcomings would be “to condemn oneself to exile, to the naked, individual I,”<sup>101</sup> which is of course what

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<sup>99</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 196. Croatian: “Dodajmo fusnoti podatak da je u vrijeme dok su stanovnici Sarajeva ginuli, a stanovnici Dubrovnika oprezno uzimali dah, iz Venecije prema Dubrovniku kretao brod. Na PEN-brodu bili su pisci iz cijeloga svijeta, ponajviše je bilo hrvatskih. Pisci su jadranskim jastozima i vinom podmazivali grla pripremajući se za predstojeću verbalnu bitku protiv ‘fašizma.’ O njihovoj bici na moru, a kasnije i na kopnu, svakodnevno su izvještavale novine” (249).

<sup>100</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 187. Croatian: “to je zato što smo svi mi zapravo zaljubljeni u Hrvatsku” (238).

<sup>101</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 187. Croatian: “osuditi samoga sebe na izgon, na golo, individualno ja” (239).

Ugrešić effectively did to herself.<sup>102</sup>

In 1998 Ugrešić put the dilemma succinctly:

For me the “Croatian witches” case was only an episode in a chain of unpleasant experiences which began with the patriotic attack on me by Antun Šoljan as a traitor, and which continues to this day . . . the fact is that then, in 1992, only two or three people stood behind me publicly, and one of those was Viktor Ivančić.<sup>103</sup> The fact is, likewise, that privately only a few people stood behind me, and they are my friends to this day. The fact is that the Arts Faculty, my colleagues, the professoriate, friends with whom I had worked for twenty years turned their backs on me. The fact is that writers, PEN, journalists, the so-called Croatian “intelligentsia” turned against me. Friends and acquaintances turned their backs on me, and the anonymous and the righteous made threatening phone calls and sent threatening letters. And the most important fact in all of this is that the “Tuđman regime” didn’t denounce me as a “witch,” nor was it a “little joke” on the part of Slaven Letica and *Globus*. The media lynching, ostracism, professional marginalisation, and personal discrimination were conscientiously performed by my entire cultural milieu, my colleagues; both those I know and those I’ve never met. They did it of their own accord, in accordance with their consciences, by their own hand. Those who wisely remained silent, who thought that things like this only happen to others, they figured that it must be in some way justified. And they too participated in it all with their silence.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> At the time Ugrešić and Prosperov Novak hotly debated the “Witches of Rio” scandal and related questions in the media, a state of affairs forced upon Ugrešić. The exchange began when she sent a private letter to Croatian PEN seeking a public apology, a letter that Prosperov Novak then had published in the *Slobodna Dalmacija* daily alongside his (much longer) response. See Dubravka Ugrešić, “Tražim javnu ispriku” [“I Am Seeking a Public Apology”], *Slobodna Dalmacija*, December 27, 1992; Slobodan Prosperov Novak, “Doviđenja na Lovrjencu” [“See You on Lovrjenac,”], *Slobodna Dalmacija*, December 27, 1992; Dubravka Ugrešić, “Riječ o ostavci moram i održati” [“I Have to Keep My Word about Resigning”], *Slobodna Dalmacija*, January 2, 1993.

<sup>103</sup> Ugrešić appears to be referring to a column by Ivančić (who would later become editor of the highly respected alternative weekly *Feral Tribune*) entitled “Dinamit za moju dragu” [“Dynamite for my Dearest”], *Slobodna Dalmacija*, November 20, 1992. Among others supporting Ugrešić were Hrvoje Turковиć, “Druga meta, ista metoda,” [“Different Target, Same Method”] *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, November 16, 1992; Anita Ivanić, “Zašto vas vlast uopće napada!?” [“Why on Earth is the Government Attacking You!?”] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, November 20, 1992; and with some qualifications, Jurica Pavičić, “Zašto protiv slabih” [“Why against the Weak”] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, November 21, 1992.

<sup>104</sup> Cited in Đikić, “Zastava za metenje,” 34. Croatian: “Slučaj ‘hrvatskih vještica’ za mene je samo epizoda u lancu neugodnosti koje su započele napadom rodoljubivog Antuna Šoljana na mene izdajicu, i koje traju sve do danas . . . Činjenica je da su tada, 1992., iza mene javno stale samo dvije-tri osobe, a jedna od njih je bio Viktor Ivančić. Činjenica je, također, da je iza mene privatno stalo samo nekoliko osoba, one su i danas moji prijatelji. Činjenica je da se protiv mene okrenuo Filozofski fakultet, kolege, profesori, prijatelji s kojima sam radila dvadeset godina. Činjenica je da su se protiv mene okrenuli književnici, PEN, novinari, tzv. hrvatska ‘inteligencija.’ Prijatelji i



## 2.10 “Gingerbread Heart Culture”

A third example of the extraliterary attacks that characterised Ugrešić’s treatment at the hands of her milieu is a letter to the editor of the Austrian literary journal *Literatur und Kritik* by Ugrešić’s then university colleague, Viktor Žmegač.<sup>105</sup> Žmegač’s letter, a response to the February 1993 publication of an essay by Ugrešić entitled “Die Kultur der Lebkuchenherzen” (“Gingerbread Heart Culture”<sup>106</sup>) is likewise barely registered in Ugrešić scholarship, yet (alongside Šoljan’s failure) represents one of the few Croatian attempts to challenge Ugrešić in an international forum.<sup>107</sup> The letter itself supports Ugrešić’s claim that the media persecution and cultural ostracism that led to her “voluntary” exile from Croatia were not only carried out by the tabloid and government-sponsored media (for all intents and purposes often one and the same), but indeed as she claimed, her entire cultural milieu.

Ugrešić opens her essay with an explanation of Nabokov’s use of the Russian word *poshlost’*, which Nabokov defined as “a special name for smug philistinism,”

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znanci okrenuli su mi leđa, a anonimni ‘pravednici’ zagorčavali su mi život telefonskim pozivima i pismima. Pritom je najvažnija činjenica da me ‘vješticom’ nije proglasio ‘Tuđmanov režim,’ niti je to bila ‘mala šala’ Slavena Letice i Globusa. Medijski linč, ostracizam, profesionalnu marginalizaciju i osobnu diskriminaciju zdušno je obavljala cijela moja kulturna sredina, moje kolege, oni koje poznajem i oni koje nikad nisam upoznala. Činili su to sami, po svojoj savjesti, na svoju ruku. Oni koji su mudro šutjeli, mislili su da se takvo što događa samo drugima, a kad se već događa, valjda u svemu tome ima neke pravde. I oni su u svemu sudjelovali šutnjom.”

<sup>105</sup> Viktor Žmegač, letter to the editor, *Literatur und Kritik*, April 1993: 105–106.

<sup>106</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, “Die Kultur der Lebkuchenherzen,” *Literatur und Kritik*, February 1993, 25–29. “Gingerbread Heart Culture” is itself a reference to Ugrešić’s fellow Yugoslav *apatride*, Danilo Kiš, and his essay “O Nacionalizmu” [“On Nationalism”]. When “Die Kultur der Lebkuchenherzen” finally appeared in Croatian (collected in *Kultura laži* as “Kultura licitarskog srca,” 67–73) it was preceded by Kiš’s famous dictum that “Nacionalizam je ideologija banalnosti” (“Nationalism is the ideology of the banal”). See also *The Culture of Lies*, 49–54.

<sup>107</sup> A number of caustic reactions were, however, published in local media, among them, Juraj M. Cinzek, “‘Humanističko’ zaglupljivanje” [“‘Humanistic’ Dumbing Down”], *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, June 23, 1993.

and “not only an aesthetic judgment but also a moral indictment.”<sup>108</sup> Reflecting on the interplay between the socialist kitsch of the former Yugoslav state, and the nationalist kitsch of the statelets that replaced it, in Ugrešić’s account socialist kitsch centred on the ideology of brotherhood and unity, internationalism, and social equality, while nationalist kitsch is devoted to *Blut und Boden* ideas of national sovereignty and exclusivity. Populating the void left by the disappearance of the common Yugoslav state, the newly manufactured kitsch of the fledgling Croatian state includes Catholic candles and crosses, gingerbread hearts, and national costumes. The new Serbian kitsch involves a similar raid on the *Volksmuseum*—a jumble of Orthodox icons, peasant shoes, and Chetnik caps. Created in peacetime, socialist kitsch had a futuristic projection, lending it a utopian character, while “gingerbread heart culture,” the kitsch of nationalism, is an “icing” to cover and sweeten the unsightly face of the war’s destruction.

Rather than on Ugrešić’s actual essay, Žmegač’s initial attack centres on the unfortunate biographical note on Ugrešić written by the journal’s editorial staff, describing her as “an opponent of the Titoist regime and critic of the new Croatian nationalism.”<sup>109</sup> In light of Ugrešić’s (to that point) playful postmodern oeuvre and the fact that the cultural and literary space of the second Yugoslavia had little in common with other east European countries, the biographical note

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<sup>108</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, “On Philistines and Philistinism,” *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

<sup>109</sup> Editorial note, *Literatur und Kritik*, February 1993. German: “eine Oppositionelle des Tito-Regimes und Kritikerin des neuen kroatischen Nationalismus” (n.p.). When the essay was published in the Swiss *Berner Zeitung* of April 19, 1993, this part of Ugrešić’s biographical note had been amended to read: “Die 44jährige Autorin kann wegen ihrer kritischen Einstellung zum Krieg und zum nationalfaschistischen Regime Franjo Tudjman nur in westlichen Medien publizieren.” (“As a result of her critical attitude towards the war and the nationalist-fascist regime of Franjo Tuđman, the 44-year-old author can only publish in western media.”)

offers unfortunate evidence of the frequently limited western understanding of the Yugoslav context. Although Žmegač would have known the note didn't come from Ugrešić, he nonetheless seized the opportunity to launch a malicious counterclaim: that Ugrešić had been a writer “indulged” by the former Yugoslav regime, the accusation’s mendacity only surpassed by its superb calibration.

Directed at a literary German language readership, the insinuation that Ugrešić had actually been a *Staatsdichterin* inextricably linked her with the most visceral intellectual critic of German reunification, the East German writer Christa Wolf. Revelations that Wolf had met with the *Stasi* several times between 1959 and 1962 had dominated German cultural politics in the months immediately preceding the publication of Žmegač’s letter. In the wake of the attacks on Wolf, Günter Grass suggested that she had served as the “sacrificial lamb in the ideological unification of the two Germanys.”<sup>110</sup> The point to be made here is that while Ugrešić and Wolf’s literary and extraliterary lives are in almost no way comparable, Ugrešić performed a very similar sacrificial function in the homogenisation of the new Croatian state. In response to what she perceived as attempts at conservation restoration, Wolf wrote that the post-*Wende* period was “a moment of opportunity, and people are taking advantage of it. The German woman too can be put back in her proper place,”<sup>111</sup> a comment easily transferable to the post-Yugoslav context. As Huyssen writes, the attacks on Wolf following the appearance of her novella *Was bleibt* (1990, *What Remains*) were

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<sup>110</sup> Cited in Ann Stamp Miller, *The Cultural Politics of the German Democratic Republic: The Voices of Wolf Biermann, Christa Wolf, and Heiner Müller* (Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press, 2004), 116.

<sup>111</sup> Christa Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, 286.

only the trigger for a debate that was preprogrammed by the logic of political events. This explains why the debate was so massively overdetermined, and why neither the attacks nor the defenses of Wolf, the author and the person, ever rose to the challenge of discussing politics and aesthetics both in their linkage and in their separation.<sup>112</sup>

Tellingly, Wolf used the term *Hexenjagd* (“witchhunt”) to describe the attacks against her, yet another of the uncanny symmetries with the attacks on Ugrešić and other female intellectuals in post-independence Croatia. As one of Wolf’s German critics baldly put it, “[t]his is no academic question. He who determines what was also determines what will be.”<sup>113</sup>

Žmegač begins his letter by establishing his “right to speak,” noting that he is both an occasional contributor and longtime reader of the journal, and assuring his audience that, given his collegial relationship with Ugrešić at the University Zagreb, he is a reliable witness to her professional life. Noting that he is familiar with Ugrešić’s entire literary output—from her fiction to her more recent political essays—Žmegač describes himself as an “insider.” Having established his authority, Žmegač questions “several misleading claims”<sup>114</sup> in the journal’s biographical note. With a casual sarcasm, he suggests that the assertion that Ugrešić had been an opponent of Tito had baffled anyone familiar with Ugrešić and her work, and that at least for the Croatian reading public, the revelation cast Ugrešić’s pre-1990 oeuvre in a completely new light. Citing her success with critics and popularity with readers in the former Yugoslavia, Žmegač counters that, far from being a victim of persecution, Ugrešić was “rather a writer

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<sup>112</sup> Huyssen, “After the Wall,” 66.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>114</sup> Žmegač, letter, 105. German: “einige irreführende Behauptungen.”

indulged by Tito's regime."<sup>115</sup> The subtext is that Ugrešić's apparent claim to dissidence is an attempt to (falsely) insert herself into the lofty tradition of east European intellectual opposition to communism. It is, however, instructive for us to note that Tito died in 1980, while the work that first brought Ugrešić to wide attention in the former Yugoslavia, *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*, was first published in 1981. In this respect, any talk of "Tito's regime" is at best metonymic, and at worst, mendacious.

Wisely remaining silent on the "Witches of Rio" affair itself, Žmegač takes issue with the claim that the "witch-hunt" has been and is being conducted by media loyal to Franjo Tuđman's government, a claim he suggests "leads the ignorant reader to a completely false conclusion."<sup>116</sup> Žmegač, the insider, maintains that *Globus* "is everything but loyal to the government,"<sup>117</sup> and in a manner of speaking, he was correct. *Globus* was then, and is today, an "independent" publication. The article "Croatian Feminists Rape Croatia" did in fact contain a number of attacks against prominent Croatian government figures (in particular Vladimir Šeks, at the time the Croatian Attorney General, and who has often served as Speaker of the Croatian Parliament) for their judicial and bureaucratic persecution of journalists, which, as the article maintained, had drawn negative international media coverage and blackened Croatia's reputation abroad. More remarkably, the *Globus* article had also suggested that "piskarala" ("hacks") from state-controlled dailies such as *Večernji list*, who, by encouraging attacks on

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. German: "vom Tito-regime eher verwöhnten Verfasserin."

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 106. German: "den unkundigen Leser zu völlig falschen Schlußfolgerungen verleitet."

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. German: "alles andere als regierungstreu ist."

press freedom, had “lecherously nursed their own professional complexes,”<sup>118</sup> were as responsible for the damage done to Croatia’s reputation abroad as the five “witches.”

What Žmegač was not telling his Germanophone readers is that the *Globus* article appeared a mere six days after the three simultaneously published pieces in the two government-loyal dailies. If Žmegač had really wanted to inform his German-language readership, he might have made a start by explaining the stunning ideological convergence (albeit one disavowed by *Globus*) between the “government-sponsored” and “independent” media. Žmegač goes on to state that Ugrešić is permanently employed, not exposed to any kind of repression, travels abroad, and always granted leave by her employer, even “in questionable circumstances.”<sup>119</sup> In a complete non-sequitur, he then arbitrarily turns his attention to the modesty of Ugrešić’s salary, noting that this is a fate shared by all, and not just “die Andersdenkenden” (“the dissidents”). Continuing, he asserts that everyone in Croatia knows who started the war, and asks his readers whether they have forgotten that Croatia has to provide for half a million refugees on a daily basis, and how on earth a country ravaged by war is supposed to offer good salaries. Given that absolutely no mention of (or allusion to) salaries in wartime Croatia (Ugrešić’s or anyone else’s) is made in Ugrešić’s essay or the accompanying biographical note, one can only conclude that not satisfied with the targets already provided for attack, Žmegač decided to invent one of his own.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “sladostrasno liječila vlastite profesionalne komplekse.”

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. German: “unter anfechtbaren Umständen.”

Only in the final fifth of his letter does Žmegač finally get to Ugrešić's actual essay, claiming that in her repulsion at everything she deems "nationalist kitsch," Ugrešić fails to differentiate between attacker and attacked, murderer and victim, rapist and raped, taking particular offence at the following passage:

In the reality of war "gingerbread heart culture" intensifies its strategy of seduction and penetrates all the pores of daily life like a virus, transforming real horror into the horror of *poshlost*. The sad voices of reporters, long TV shots, pictures of dead bodies, funerals, corpses wrapped in national flags, the ritual receipt of military honours which resemble taking communion, the general theatricalisation of death, horrors accompanied by newly-composed Yugoslav drumming, cassettes threatening to annihilate the enemy with folkloric gusto, posters, a newly-composed patriotic squeal, the kitsch propaganda industry of war—all of this is bubbling in a Yugoslav hotpot between tragedy and farce, suffering and indifference, compassion and cynicism, terror and parody.<sup>120</sup>

Seizing on Ugrešić's inclusion of funerals and corpses wrapped in national flags in her inventory of state-sponsored kitsch, Žmegač contends that this is done at the request of the parents (particularly given that their sons' bodies are often mutilated), and that while one can make what one will of such requests, anyone with a modicum of sensitivity would not designate these as kitsch. As Žmegač insists, in the face of a parent's "endless suffering," any judgments pertaining to good and bad taste fail, and therefore Ugrešić's essay is nothing other than "meta-kitsch."

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<sup>120</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 53. Croatian: "U ratnoj zbilji kultura 'licitarskog srca' pojačava strategiju zavodenja, poput virusa prodire u sve pore dnevnog života (u novine, medije, jezik, televizijske slike) pretvarajući zbiljski užas u užas pošlosti. Tužni glasovi reportera, spori kadrovi, slike mrtvih tijela, pokopi, leševi omotani u nacionalne zastave, ritualna primanja ratnih odlikovanja koja nalikuju primanju hostiju, opća teatralizacija smrti, užasi popraćeni novokomponiranim drndanjem, kasete koje folklornom dernjavom prijete neprijatelju da će biti uništen, plakati, novokomponirani rodoljubni cilik, kičerska propagandna industija rata—sve se to krčka u jugo-loncu između tragedije i farse, patnje i ravnodušnosti, suosjećanja i cinizma, jeze i parodije" (72). Although Žmegač is naturally responding to the version of the essay published in German, I have felt it more appropriate to cite the anthologized version of the essay, which does not differ in any significant respect.

In Kundera's definition, kitsch is "the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence."<sup>121</sup> In close connection, "totalitarian" means the lifetime banishment of

everything that infringes on kitsch . . . every display of individualism (because a deviation from the collective is a spit in the eye of the smiling brotherhood); every doubt (because anyone who starts doubting details will end by doubting life itself); all irony (because in the realm of kitsch everything must be taken quite seriously).<sup>122</sup>

And as Kundera continues, "[i]n the realm of totalitarian kitsch, all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions," meaning "that the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions"—a question being "like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it."<sup>123</sup> In her essay, Ugrešić takes her knife and cuts below the icing of the gingerbread heart, revealing not its sweetness, but its rottenness and decay. Žmegač's anger, on the other hand, is guided by the thought that "[w]hen the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme."<sup>124</sup>

Ugrešić responded to Žmegač's letter (excerpts of which were published in an article by Branka Kamenski entitled "Kič Dubravke Ugrešić" ["The Kitsch of Dubravka Ugrešić"] in the *Večernji list* daily of June 6, 1993) in a piece entitled

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<sup>121</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 246.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 251.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 248.



“Pravo na kolektivnu cenzuru” (“The Right to Collective Censorship”) published on June 16. Ugrešić agrees with Žmegač that she was never a dissident, but simply an outsider who was never a member of the Yugoslav League of Communists, never a member of any groups or societies (apart from Croatian PEN and the Croatian Writers’ Association), never a member of an award jury, selection committee, or editorial board. Unlike the many freshly converted anti-communists who were attacking her, she never received a state apartment. She points out that in the time of “Tito’s regime” Žmegač himself enjoyed a successful academic career, publishing every book he ever wrote, being honoured with awards, positive reviews, trips abroad, and scholarships, and attaining a well-deserved international reputation as a Germanist.<sup>125</sup> Ugrešić’s most telling revelation, however, is that Žmegač was head of the committee that in 1988 awarded financial support for the publication of *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, and that he had himself written a positive review of the novel—written, let us not forget, by a writer “indulged by Tito’s regime.”

To Žmegač’s accusation that Ugrešić is a producer of “meta-kitsch” (a term he borrows from Hermann Broch), Ugrešić explains her essay in the most direct terms:

[S]ymbols of nationalist kitsch (Croatian and Serbian) appear grotesque sitting alongside real victims, real deaths, and a real war. Gingerbread heart culture in its gentle folksy-fairground form can be agreeable (or disagreeable), but when beneath the gingerbread heart a real grave stretches out, then this kind of kitsch provokes horror, not sympathy.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Today Žmegač is Professor Emeritus of Modern German Literature at the University of Zagreb.

<sup>126</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, “Pravo na kolektivnu cenzuru” [“The Right to Collective Censorship”], *Nedjeljna Dalmacija*, June 16, 1993. Croatian: “Moja teza bila je da simboli nacionalističkoga kiča (pritom s obje, hrvatske i srpske strane) djeluju groteskno u sprezi sa zbiljskim žrtvama,

Reflecting on all the attacks against her, and specifically that of Žmegač, Ugrešić concludes:

In the end it begs a question much more interesting than open letters and closed truths. Namely, how is it that in a country attacked by a much stronger aggressor, with a third of its territory occupied, in a country which every day counts its dead, in which hundreds and hundreds of destroyed homes stand wide open, a country heaving under the weight of refugees who “endlessly suffer”—as the distinguished Germanist claims—how is it, then, that in such a country the entire cultural, media, and political community, so unitedly, so unanimously, so collectively, so devotedly, are on their feet over some crappy article published abroad by some crappy writer out there. My sins don’t exceed twenty pages of written text.<sup>127</sup>

### 2.11 The Croatian *Kulturkampf*, the Émigré Writer, and Literary History

Although the term *Kulturkampf* has its origin in Bismarck’s attempts to weaken the influence of the Catholic Church in the newly formed German Empire, today, along with its newer English calque “culture war,” it is understood as a social and political conflict between conservative and liberal forces in a given society. Confirming the existence of a *Kulturkampf* in post-independence Croatia, Andrea Zlatar writes that throughout the 1990s the country was divided into “two cultures, two separate, unconnected, mutually exclusive cultural spheres.”<sup>128</sup> On

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zbiljskim smrtima i zbiljskim ratom. Kultura licitarskoga srca u svom umilnom, pučko-vašarskom, folklornom obliku može biti dopadljiva (ili nedopadljiva), ali kad ispod licitarskog srca zjapi zbiljski grob, onda ta vrsta kiča izaziva jezu, a ne ganuće.”

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Postavlja se na kraju pitanje koje je mnogo zanimljivije od osobnih pisama i zatvorenih istina. Naime, kako to da se u zemlji koja je napadnuta od mnogo jačeg agresora, s trećinom okupirana teritorija, u zemlji koja svakodnevno broji svoje mrtve, u kojoj zjapi stotine i stotine srušenih domova, koja stenje pod izbjeglicama, koja *beskrajno pati*—kako to tvrdi i ugledni germanist—kako to, dakle, da se u takvoj zemlji cijela kulturna, medijska i politička javnost tako složno, tako jednostavno, tako kolektivno, tako predano diže na noge zbog nekog tamo člancića neke tamo književnice. Moji grijesi, naime, ne premašuju dvadesetak stranica pisanoga teksta.”

<sup>128</sup> Andrea Zlatar, “Culture in Croatia During the Transition Period,” trans. Dubravka Petrović, *Eurozine*, April 13, 2001 <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2001-04-13-zlatar-en.html> [accessed 16 August 2010].

the one hand was a “statist, national, and conservative culture,” and on the other, “an alternative, urban, aesthetically provocative culture orientated towards the values of Western Europe.”<sup>129</sup> Zlatar suggests that the first of these cultures was “autistic and xenophobic . . . focused on the past and self-referential,” while the opposing culture, supported by independent intellectuals, writers, and critics, the independent media and non-governmental organisations, was one which attempted to “examine and critically interpret the present” and as such, act as “a culture of translation, a culture of connection, a culture of change . . . a culture of provocation, not affirmation.”<sup>130</sup>

As a professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Zagreb, someone active in local body politics, and a former editor of several significant cultural journals, Zlatar is ideally placed to insist on such a clear-cut typology. The difficulty is that in terms of Ugrešić’s literary and extraliterary reception in post-independence Croatia, the picture is significantly messier. While men such as Slaven Letica or Denis Kuljiš might be easy cases to file, as indicated by their biographies, figures such as Antun Šoljan, Slobodan Prosperov Novak, and Viktor Žmegač don’t readily fit Zlatar’s polemical typology. Moreover, it is simply not the case that Ugrešić received any better treatment by those purporting to belong to the liberal or “better” Croatia. In an article entitled “Kako prodati domovinu za samo što njemačkih maraka” (“How To Sell One’s Homeland for a Mere Hundred German Marks”<sup>131</sup>), the author, an apparent multi-talent by the name of Branko Maleš, declares himself a member not of the nationalist

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Branko Maleš, “Kako prodati domovinu za samo sto njemačkih maraka,” *Slavonski Magazin*, July 15, 1993.

conservative party of Franjo Tuđman, but of the social democratic opposition. Although he only attacks Ugrešić's fellow witch Slavenka Drakulić by name, it is Ugrešić's photo that accompanies his ravings about female "dissidents" who joyously spit on their homeland abroad for small change.

A closer-to-home example complicating Zlatar's typology is the surprisingly savage attack on Ugrešić in what was ostensibly a review of Miljenko Jergović's 2002 novel *Buick Rivera* published in the independent cultural weekly *Zarez*, of which Zlatar was the founding editor. Devoting almost half her review to mauling Ugrešić's success abroad,<sup>132</sup> the reviewer, Nela Rubić, begins by stating that were the number of international awards received the only reliable criteria to measure the quality of writers from the former Yugoslavia, Jergović would certainly be considered a lesser writer than Ugrešić. Rubić notes that *The Culture of Lies* was awarded the Charles Veillon prize for best European essay collection in 1996 and the Dutch *Verzetsprijs* 1997, and that in 2000 *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* was awarded the Heinrich Mann prize. Yet as she maintains, while both Mann brothers were sworn anti-fascists, Heinrich's cultural legacy, as opposed to that of his brother Thomas, is almost exclusively based on his opposition to fascism (and support for communism), rather than his literary exploits. All this, however, is merely a prelude to Rubić's real problem—a passage from *The Culture of Lies* in which, she alleges, Ugrešić (in an internal monologue) refers to Bosnian writer, Dževad Karahasan:

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<sup>132</sup> Nela Rubić, "Rutinsko ponavljanje zla" ["The Routine Repetition of Evil"], review of *Buick Riviera* by Miljenko Jergović, *Zarez*, March 13, 2003, [http://free-zg.htnet.hr/jergovic/recenzije/rivera\\_zarez.htm](http://free-zg.htnet.hr/jergovic/recenzije/rivera_zarez.htm) [accessed 30 July 2011].

I take the microphone, the applause is restrained. A colleague from Sarajevo appears, the applause is frenetic. My colleagues wipe tears from their eyes, fall into a passionate clinch with the Sarajevan, they dance a sorrowful tango, patting him long and tenderly on the back. I wipe my eyes as well. Our colleague is suddenly no longer a colleague but a living metaphor of the sufferings of Sarajevo. I see him straightening his shoulders, his step becomes proud, his movements dignified, his face ennobled with collective suffering. It is true that our colleague has left Sarajevo, that he is enjoying the hospitality of a foreign European country, but it doesn't matter. Now he is Sarajevo-man.<sup>133</sup>

Completely removing the passage from its context, Rubić accuses Ugrešić of “disputing the right to ‘martyrdom’ of a Bosnian writer who made it out of war-time Sarajevo,”<sup>134</sup> and maintains that Ugrešić has “built her own exilic hagiography in which she has declared herself the former Yugoslavia’s principal martyr.”<sup>135</sup> Moreover, Ugrešić’s “exclusively (auto)hagiographic mechanisms . . . masked by ironic levity”<sup>136</sup> are reminiscent of “the callous manipulative media mechanisms”<sup>137</sup> employed by the local patriots responsible for her own persecution. Rubić contends that Jergović—as opposed to Ugrešić and Karahasan—is just a writer, rather than a Balkan writer in exile in the West. Neither is Jergović, she claims, a writer of political essays, so he hasn’t been able to effectively lobby for himself on the international stage. Contending that Jergović’s literary output is devoid of exilic or ideological calculations (which,

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<sup>133</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 177. Croatian: “Pojavljujem se pred mikrofonom, pljesak je umjeren. Pojavljuje se kolega iz Sarajeva, pljesak je frenetičan. Kolege brišu suze, hvataju se u topli klinč sa Sarajlijom, dugo i ganuto tapšaju Sarajliju po ramenima. Kolega najednom više nije kolega nego živa metafora sarajevskih patnji. Vidim, ispravlja ramena, njegov hod je ponosit, kretnje odmjerene, njegovo lice oplemenjeno kolektivnom patnjom. Kolega je, doduše, izašao iz Sarajeva, živi u gostoljubivu evropskom inozemstvu, ali ne smeta. Sada je čovjek-Sarajevo” (227).

<sup>134</sup> Rubić, “Rutinsko ponavljanje.” Croatian: “osporivši pravo na ‘mučeništvo’ bošnjačkom piscu izišlom iz ratnog Sarajeva.”

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “gradila vlastitu egzilantsku hagiografiju u kojoj se proglasila za prvomučenicu iz bivše Jugoslavije.”

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “ekskluzivno (auto)hagiografski mehanizmi . . . zamaskirani ironijskom lakoćom.”

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “beščutni manipulativni medijski mehanizmi.”

Rubić adds, can't be said of Ugrešić's recent literary output), she suggests that audiences read his work for its narrative mastery—in the same way they used to read Ugrešić's Yugoslav-era fiction—and not because of “essayistic-political narcissistic graphomania.”<sup>138</sup>

It is impossible to know for whom Rubić thinks she is writing. Outside of the former Yugoslavia, Jergović has enjoyed considerable success, and is best-known for his debut collection of short stories, *Sarajevski Marlboro* (1993, *Sarajevo Marlboro*), set in wartorn Sarajevo. She likewise ignores the fact that for almost two decades Jergović has contributed feuilleton-esque columns to mainstream Croatian media, many of which could be broadly described as cultural and political criticism, for which he has consistently been attacked by nationalist commentators. Finally, the book that Rubić was ostensibly reviewing, *Buick Riviera*, is the tale of the encounter of a Serb and a Bosnian Muslim in America following the war, the Serb playing the part of a war criminal with a new identity in America. If Rubić's criticism of Ugrešić is essentially that her work is popular abroad for extraliterary reasons, then she is rather conveniently ignoring the reality that the same criticism could just as easily be levelled at Jergović.

In Cold War eastern Europe, Czech dissident Milan Jungmann's dismissal of Kundera's exilic fiction as eliciting an “undifferentiated and uncritical reception” in the West and in the Czech émigré community, while being met by

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “esejističko-političku narcisoidnu grafomaniju.”

“embarrassed and perplexed silence by Czechoslovak dissidents”<sup>139</sup> was emblematic of the way many exiles were treated by their “brothers-in-arms” at home.<sup>140</sup> Throughout the 1990s, Ugrešić only published two essay collections in Croatia, and although she left the country permanently in September 1993, it would be fair to say that she maintained a kind of “phantom presence.” As she remarked in 1998, “[i]t seems that I abandoned the Croatian milieu long ago. But it seems that the Croatian milieu hasn’t quite abandoned me. I understand, it’s hardest to be left on one’s own, without enemies.”<sup>141</sup>

## 2.12 Omission, Elision, Derision

Ugrešić’s phantom presence in Croatian letters is best exemplified in the first history of Croatian literature to be published in the post-independence period, in which her prose was dealt with in five lines. Yet in the volume’s closing note, she is named as one of only four Croatian writers who “failed to recognise the historic moment for which Croatian literature had yearned for centuries,” one of four refuseniks who, as the volume’s author Dubravko Jelčić puts it, “having voluntarily chosen life abroad, created a new body of politically-influenced emigrant literature.” As Jelčić maintains, the first body of such literature, created between 1945 and 1990 was “born of a lack of freedom in the homeland” while

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<sup>139</sup> Cited in Hana Pichova, “Milan Kundera and the Identity of Central Europe” in *Comparative Central European Culture*, ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2002), 105-6.

<sup>140</sup> While Kundera may have been forced into exile by the communist ban on his books, it is worthwhile remembering that the controversial and marginal place he came to occupy within Czech letters has as much to do with his dispute (stemming from his essay “Czech Destiny”) with Václav Havel at the time of Prague Spring as it ever did with communist ostracism. For more on this see the Pichova chapter above.

<sup>141</sup> Đikić, “Zastava za metenje,” 34. Croatian: “Čini mi se da sam odavno napustila hrvatsku sredinu. Hrvatska sredina još uvijek, čini se, nije napustila mene. Razumijem je, najteže je ostati sam, bez neprijatelja.”

the new body, that written since 1990, was “born as a consequence of freedom, which a small number of individuals could not accept.”<sup>142</sup>

In a similar anthology published the same year, Miroslav Šicel, like Jelčić, managed to cover Ugrešić’s prose in five lines and likewise made no mention of the essay collections *American Fictionary* or *The Culture of Lies*.<sup>143</sup> The bibliographic entry on Ugrešić in a lexicon of Croatian writers published in 2000 did, however, touch on the politics of her situation. In an entry of about 500 words, her essays were covered in less than 50 words, the key remarks being that “in the 1990s the author published polemically intoned politicized essays in which she put forth her perspective on events in Croatia, provoking various reactions among the Croatian cultural public.”<sup>144</sup>

Two new histories of Croatian literature were published in 2003. Given its title, Krešimir Nemeč’s *History of the Croatian Novel 1945-2000* unsurprisingly ignored Ugrešić’s essay collections, and likewise omitted mention of the novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, presumably because it was not published in Croatian until 2002. Although Nemeč offers *Steffie Speck in the Jaws*

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<sup>142</sup> Dubravko Jelčić, *Povijest hrvatske književnosti: tisućljeće od Bašćanske ploče do postmoderne* (Zagreb: Naklada PIP Pavičić, 2004), 615. The complete original Croatian passage reads: “Samo četvoro hrvatskih književnika nije prepoznalo povijesni trenutak, kojemu je hrvatska književnost stoljećima težila . . . Izabravši dragovoljno život u inozemstvu, oni su stvorili novi krug politički obojene hrvatske književne emigracije. Onaj prvi, od 1945. do 1990., bio je posljedica neslobode u domovini, ovaj drugi, od 1990./91. nastao je, obratno, kao posljedica slobode, koju malobrojni pojedinci nisu moli prihvatiti.” The other three writers named were Predrag Matvejević, Slavenka Drakulić, and Goran Babić. It is worth noting that Jelčić was also one of Ugrešić’s first media attackers, see “Glose iz dnevnika” [“Diary Glosses”], *Novi vjesnik*, December 16, 1992.

<sup>143</sup> Miroslav Šicel, *Hrvatska književnost stoljeća 19. i 20.* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1997), 255. Ugrešić’s biographical note in Šicel’s *Antologija hrvatske kratke priče* (Zagreb: Disput, 2001), 524, likewise omits any mention of Ugrešić’s essay collections, but does make mention of her three books for children and her scholarly work.

<sup>144</sup> Krešimir Nemeč, ed., *Leksikon hrvatskih pisaca* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2000), 741. Croatian: “u 90-ima autorica objavljuje polemički intonirane politizirane eseje u kojima iznosi svoje viđenje hrvatske zbilje i kojima izaziva različite reakcije hrvatske kulturne javnosti.”



*of Life* and *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* sympathetic and comprehensive scholarly treatment, he concludes his (close to four-page) entry with the remark that although the latter novel is “intelligently written prose,” another reviewer’s claim that it is better than almost anything written by Ugrešić’s generation is “certainly an exaggeration.”<sup>145</sup>

The second history of Croatian literature published in 2003 was—depending on one’s point of view—tragically, comically, or tragi-comically written by the original architect of the “Witches of Rio” scandal, Slobodan Prosperov Novak. Like Nemeč, Prosperov Novak offers a sympathetic and comprehensive overview of Ugrešić’s postmodern poetics, and with particular lucidity notes that although Ugrešić’s Yugoslav-era fiction was intentionally de-ideologised, the “little people” she depicted were often the bearers of important social truths. To both his credit and disgrace, Prosperov Novak devotes considerable space to Ugrešić’s essays from the 1990s, assessing Ugrešić’s engagement as follows:

The political positions of Dubravka Ugrešić are based on very precise assessments of small things and trivial human events, but at the same time the author has forgotten that these are not a measure of political developments, which, however provincial, nonetheless mobilise considerable energy which cannot be banalized, and which creates desired social changes.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Kresimir Nemeč, *Povijest hrvatskog romana od 1945. do 2000. godine* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2003), 320-23.

<sup>146</sup> Slobodan Prosperov Novak, *Povijest hrvatske književnosti: od Bašćanske ploče do danas* (Zagreb: Golden Marketing, 2003), 594–597. Croatian: “Politički stavovi Dubravke Ugrešić temeljili su se na vrlo točnim procjenama malih stvari i sitnih ljudskih zbivanja, ali je autorica pri tome zaboravila da oni nisu mjera političkih događaja koji koliko da su provincijalni, ipak mobiliziraju znatnu energiju koja se ne može banalizirati i koja stvara željene društvene promjene” (596).

According to Prosperov Novak, in her essays Ugrešić created “a whole series of good syllogisms yet completely wrong conclusions,” and while these critical texts were “useful” and “drew attention to certain phenomena,” they nonetheless proved that “the proper position was in the middle and that in places where everything smells of gunpowder and blood, and disturbed moral codes rule the day, it is not always easy to speak out for what we think is the truth, without the consequences of that choice being drastic.”<sup>147</sup> As for Ugrešić’s decision to leave Croatia he coolly remarks that “following public pressure and unpleasant incidents, which the author assessed as being unbearable” Ugrešić resigned her university position and went abroad where she “lives the life of a medieval histrion.”<sup>148</sup> Following ten lines on *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* he concludes by suggesting that Ugrešić is the most radical Croatian writer of the postmodern condition, and that *American Fictionary* and *The Culture of Lies* are “moving document[s] of naive narration of small things in times of evil and allegedly great ideas.”<sup>149</sup> For obvious reasons Prosperov Novak neglects to mention that although he is never directly named in *The Culture of Lies*, several essays entirely unflatteringly allude to a person whom any insider would clearly identify as him.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 596-7. Croatian: “Dubravka Ugrešić stvorila je čitav niz dobrih silogizama ali sasvim krivih zaključaka. Njezini kritički tekstovi bili su korisni, izoštrili su pogled na neke pojave ali su pokazali da je prava mjera u sredini i da ondje gdje sve miriše na barut i krv i gdje vladaju poremećeni moralni kodovi, nije uvijek lako izreći ono za što smatramo da je istina, a da konzekvencije tog izbora ne budu drastične.”

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 597. Croatian: “nakon javnih pritisaka i neugodnih objeda, koje je autorica ocijenila neizdrživim”; “živi životom srednjovjekovnog histriona.”

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “knjige *Kultura laži* i *Američki fikcionar* dojmljiv dokument naive naracije malih stvari u vremenima zla i navodno velikih ideja.” The final sentence is an allusion to Franjo Tuđman’s 1969 doctoral dissertation (and book of the same name) entitled *Velike ideje i mali narodi* (“Great Ideas and Small Nations”).

By their very nature, national literary histories, anthologies, and lexicons are conceived of to define the national canon and place writers and their work within it, or as the case may sometimes be, outside it.<sup>150</sup> Vis-à-vis Dubravka Ugrešić, the cited histories of Croatian literature illustrate the three main strategies that keepers of the canon, representatives of official culture, can adopt towards those at odds with this culture: omission, elision, or derision. When we consider that in the time period during which the cited histories of Croatian literature were published Ugrešić received a number of significant European literary prizes, and that her books were translated into over twenty languages—enthusiastically reviewed (for the most part, yet certainly not exclusively so) everywhere from *The New York Times* to *The Times Literary Supplement* to *Die Zeit* and *Le Monde*—it is apparent that her Croatian archivists care very little for other evidence in the archive. Writing for a local audience, and with their texts bearing the stamps of official literary history, they seem confident that in Croatia no one will care enough to excavate the countertexts. As Umberto Eco thoughtfully put it, “[o]ne forgets not by cancellation but by superimposition, not by producing absence but by multiplying presences.”<sup>151</sup>

### 2.13 In the Ruins of Exile

In her chief essay on the subject, “The Writer in Exile,” Ugrešić recalls being invited to speak at an academic conference at which she commits the social *bêtise* of presenting herself to her fellow participants as a colleague. She writes:

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<sup>150</sup> The most recent anthological volume, published in 2008, contains neutral and competent and entries on three of Ugrešić’s novels. See *Leksikon hrvatske književnosti djela*, ed. Dunja Detoni-Dujmić et al (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2008), 184; 483; 862–863.

<sup>151</sup> Umberto Eco, “An Ars Oblivionalis? Forget It!,” *PMLA* 100, no. 3 (May 1988): 260; cited in *The Culture of Lies*, 235 (*Kultura laži*, 293).

The exile is the screen onto which we project our fantasies of exile, and as long as he lets us do this, he is welcome. He is welcome as someone who has *suffered*, as a *victim of the regime*, a *fighter for democracy*, a *lover of freedom* who couldn't stand oppression in the country he left. As soon as he steps out of his stereotype, he becomes undesirable, because he has betrayed our expectations. We express our sympathy, and he, ungrateful creature, bites the hand that pets him.<sup>152</sup>

Ugrešić, having disappointed those who might have been favourably inclined towards her, is then forced to listen to one participant who suggests that her exile is phoney because she has a passport and can return, and that she should call her residency abroad by its real name: tourism. A Czech participant weighs in that he fled to West Germany to escape communism, while Ugrešić is obviously running from postcommunism, i.e. democracy, and that she should stop compromising the honoured tradition of east European exile. Hanging on notions of compulsion and volition (that Ugrešić was not forced to leave Croatia, but did so voluntarily), accusations of this nature have been made often enough in Croatia.

Ugrešić's "voluntary exile" is indeed a fascinating case with which to test historical discourse on exile, emigration, and expatriation, particularly in the east European context. What is the relationship between literal exile and *literary* exile? How are we to understand Gombrowicz's dictum that "any self-respecting

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<sup>152</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Thank You for Not Reading*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth, revised Damion Searles (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 135. First published as *Zabranjeno čitanje* (Zagreb: Konzor; Belgrade: Samizdat B92, 2002). Croatian: "Egzilant je naše projekciono platno. Sve dok egzilant potvrđuje naše vlastite fantazme o egzilantstvu, on je dobrodošao. Dobrodošao je kao stradalnik, žrtva režima, borac za demokraciju, apatrid, beskućnik, stranac, liberalni predstavnik svoje neliberalne zemlje. Čim prekorači granicu, čim iskoči iz stereotipa, on postaje nepoželjan. Zašto? Zato što je iznevjerio naša očekivanja. Mi izražavamo svoje simpatije, a on, nezahvalnik, ujeda ruku koja ga gladi" (153).

artist must be, and in more than one sense of the term, an émigré”?<sup>153</sup> Or Krleža’s insistence that in order to practise his or her craft, a writer must be “a *prodigal* son who returns to his father’s hearth only so that he may leave it again.”<sup>154</sup> Given that the death of the one-party Yugoslav state was preceded by the first multi-party elections in its constituent republics, was it possible to be a dissident in, and exiled from, what was at least nominally, a “democracy”?

If we start *ab initio*, exile is the story of Adam and Eve and banishment from the Garden of Eden. Tracing the term from its biblical origin to Ovid and Dante, through Herzen and Hugo, to Solzhenitsyn and Brodsky, exile has traditionally been understood as a punishment meted out from above for one’s political indiscretion. More than any other, however, the twentieth century gave birth to the “voluntary” or “self-imposed” exile, a category encompassing those who were not strictly banished, but who were somewhat reluctant to wait around for their persecutors or executioners to get the better of them. This of course brought with it a theoretical problem—if one could exile oneself, then what is the persecution threshold by which “justified” and “unjustified” self-exile can be differentiated?

Linked to this theoretical problem is the fact that in our time, discourses of postmodernity often employ “exile” as a metaphor for what often amounts to little more than a sense of loneliness, transforming exile into, as Danilo Kiš put it,

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<sup>153</sup> Witold Gombrowicz, *Varia*, trans. Allan Kosko (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1977) 203; quoted in Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 290. Note that the cited quotation is James’s translation of Kosko’s French translation of the original Polish.

<sup>154</sup> Cited in Matvejević, *Razgovori s Krležom*. Croatian: “On je *razmetni* sin koji se vraća svom očinskom ognjištu samo da bi mogao od njega ponovo otići” (28).

“merely a collective name for all forms of alienation.”<sup>155</sup> When we remember that “exile” became a mark of prestige in the twentieth century through its application to European intellectuals fleeing Nazism and communism, it is little wonder that critics of exile’s contemporary metaphorical inflation have suggested that, particularly in academic circles, “exile” has become a kind of fashion accessory, a betrayal of the desire to be “heroes at a discount,”<sup>156</sup> one of life’s “romantic outsiders living on the edge of the bourgeois world.”<sup>157</sup>

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to eight years in a labour camp, to be followed by permanent internal exile for, among other things, referring to Stalin as “the whiskered one” in a letter to a friend. Despite the success of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, with the end of the Krushchev Thaw in 1964, he became a non-person and was in 1974 put onto a plane to Frankfurt, a one-way ticket in his pocket. His countryman, Joseph Brodsky, was sentenced to five years in internal exile for “parasitism,” and in 1972 stripped of his citizenship and likewise expelled from the Soviet Union. Given their banishment decreed from above, both Solzhenitsyn and Brodsky appear to have fair claim to being “authentic” exiles in the biblical or classical tradition. But is this really the case? Were their departures not in fact the result of a “voluntary” agreement with the Soviet authorities that life would be better for all concerned if they left? What of Kundera, the east European writer who in the West functions as a synonym for the writer exiled by an oppressive communist regime? There is a passage in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* that might well describe the circumstances of

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<sup>155</sup> Kiš, *Homo poeticus*, 113.

<sup>156</sup> Rudolphus Teeuwen, “Fading into Metaphor: Globalization and the Disappearance of Exile” in *Creativity in Exile*, ed. Michael Hanne (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 297.

<sup>157</sup> Ian Buruma, “The Romance of Exile,” *New Republic*, February 12, 2001.

his 1975 departure from Czechoslovakia:

For eight years my country has been drowning in the sweet, strong embrace of the Russian empire, Voltaire has been thrown out of the university, and my books are banned from all public libraries, locked away in the cellars of the state. I held out a few years and then got into my car and drove as far west as I could, to the Breton town of Rennes.<sup>158</sup>

What of Czesław Miłosz, whose *The Captive Mind* defined him as one of most eloquent voices of the “kidnapped countries”? From the end of the Second World War Miłosz served as a cultural attaché at the Polish embassy in Washington and then in Paris where he sought political asylum in 1951—not because he had been singled out for persecution: he’d simply lost faith in the cause. And what of his aforementioned countryman, Witold Gombrowicz, who on the eve of the war fortuitously found himself on the maiden voyage of a Polish cruise liner bound for South America? He sensibly decided to wait out the war in Buenos Aires before migrating to Paris in 1963. The legion of Jewish intellectuals—Arendt, Einstein, and Freud among them—having seen what the Nazis were up to, “voluntarily” decided that life might be better elsewhere, preferably somewhere with a body of water—the larger the better—between them and Hitler. This “voluntary” exile ensured that their lives didn’t end in the crematoria, or for that matter, the way of Walter Benjamin, Bruno Schulz, or the Viennese polymath Egon Friedell, who on seeing the Nazi stormtroopers on their way to his apartment, jumped out the window, calling to passersby to watch their step.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Kundera, *Laughter and Forgetting*, 128.

<sup>159</sup> The anecdote is collected in James, *Cultural Amnesia*, xxiii.

In America, another “voluntary” exile, Thomas Mann, maintained that he had never left Germany, but that Germany had left him: that the *Deushtum* (“Germanness”) of the Nazis was not his *Deushtum*. Leaving Croatia, it wasn’t that Ugrešić rejected the *Hrvatstvo* (“Croatianess”) championed by the nationalists and neofascists in post-independence Croatia as not being hers, it was more that with the violent disappearance of her homeland—Yugoslavia—any kind of *Hrvatstvo* was a poor substitute for *Jugoslavenstvo* (“Yugoslavness”). Ugrešić herself framed things this way: “I myself am neither an émigré nor a refugee nor a political asylum seeker. I am a writer who at one point decided not to live in her country anymore because her country was no longer hers.”<sup>160</sup>

## 2.14 “Writers Who Disappear”

In a lecture on Elfriede Jelinek at the Austrian Cultural Centre in Zagreb following her Nobel Prize win, Jelinek’s Croatian translator stated that although Jelinek has in Austria been “branded a traitor to the homeland and a pornographer . . . she has never left Austria, and in this respect Croatian writers such as Dubravka Ugrešić and Slavenka Drakulić could learn a lot from her.”<sup>161</sup> As should be abundantly clear, the remark is not at all uncharacteristic of the Croatian “liberal” milieu’s attitude towards its exiles. Appointed Minister of Culture in the centre-left coalition government that took power in the year 2000, Antun Vujić wasted little time in proclaiming that the intellectuals, writers,

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<sup>160</sup> Ugrešić, *Thank You for Not Reading*, 130. Croatian: “Sama nisam ni emigrant, ni izbjeglica, niti politički azilant. Ja sam spisateljica koja je u jednom trenutku odlučila da više ne živi u svojoj zemlji jer njezina zemlja više nije bila njezina” (146).

<sup>161</sup> Quoted in V. Laušić, “Poučak za Drakulićku,” *Slobodna Dalmacija*, November 4, 2004, <http://arhiv.slobodnadalmacija.hr/20041104/kultura04.asp> [accessed 20 June 2011]. Croatian: “nazivana izdajicom domovine i pornografkinjom . . . ona nikada nije napustila Austriju, pa bi hrvatske autorice poput Dubravke Ugrešić ili Slavenke Drakulić od nje puno toga mogle naučiti.”



actors, and academics, who left the country during the 1990s did so entirely of their own accord, infamously remarking that “Croatia didn’t sin against anyone to the same extent that France sinned against Céline.”<sup>162</sup> Apart from the stunning rehabilitation of the anti-Semite Céline, Vujić’s declaration, as Mikulić frames it, “satisfies the epistemological and moral needs of its authors and recipients . . . about questions which might otherwise shatter the entire picture we have of ourselves.”<sup>163</sup> Across the political spectrum, the Croatian cultural milieu’s refusal to acknowledge its exiles reflects the fact that such an acknowledgement would amount to a concession that in the immediate post-independence years, newly “democratic” Croatia had far more in common with the hardline communist regimes of eastern Europe than it would care to ever admit. Democracies, after all, don’t produce dissidents, let alone exiles.

In a 2005 interview, Dubravka Ugrešić’s fellow “witch,” Slavenka Drakulić, remarked that following banishment from mainstream cultural life, the fate of the Croatian émigré writer is to simply be ignored. Drakulić cites the fact that there were only five Croatian reviews of her 2001 novel *Kao da me nema* (*As If I Am Not There*), and that in 2005 a similar silence befell the non-fiction *Oni ne bi ni mrava zgazili* (*They Would Not Hurt a Fly*). As Drakulić maintains, the former was reviewed at least 25 times in every other country in which it was published, and that in Germany “a small library of texts” was written about the latter. Explaining her position on being ignored in her homeland, Drakulić writes

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<sup>162</sup> Quoted in Mikulić, “Ministarstvo književnosti.” Croatian: “nije Hrvatska zgriješila ni prema kome onoliko koliko je Francuska zgriješila prema Célineu.”

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “zadovoljava epistemičke i moralne potrebe svojih autora i recipijenata . . . o pitanjima koja bi inače mogla uzdrmati cijelu našu sliku o sebi.”

[a]s far as attitudes towards my work in Croatia are concerned, as a proper little woman, I'm humble and content when nobody beats me. Because generally speaking, all the writers who left Croatia, or who are thought to have left, from Irena Vukljan, to Dubravka Ugrešić, to Predrag Matvejević, have been marginalised in way or another. They're judged not in relation to their creative output, but in relation to their physical presence in Croatia.<sup>164</sup>

In this respect, Ugrešić has herself remarked that in Croatia her books are either “systematically ignored or receive bad reviews.”<sup>165</sup> Prominent publisher Nenad Popović identified the same phenomenon in a 1998 essay entitled “Writers Who Disappear.” Citing the international success of Dubravka Ugrešić, Slavenka Drakulić, Slobodan Šnajder, Predrag Matvejević, and “internal exiles” Miljenko Jergović and Ivan Lovrenović as the very reason for their being shunned at “home,” Popovic suggests that “a breakthrough into world literature for contemporary Croatian writers simultaneously signals exile from their own literature.”<sup>166</sup> As Popović argues, “honoured abroad as representatives of an authentic Croatian literacy and spirituality, at home they live as ghosts.”<sup>167</sup> With “a wall of silence and ignorance” erected around them, their work only exists in “media reservations for the socially despised.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Slavenka Drakulić, “Moja je glavna ambicija samo preživljavanje” [“My Main Ambition is Just Surviving”], interview by Ivana Mikulićin, *Jutarnji list*, November 3, 2005, <http://www.mvinfo.hr/izdvojeno-razgovor-opsirnije.php?ppar=334> [accessed 30 July 2011]. Croatian: “Što se tiče odnosa prema mom radu u Hrvatskoj, ja sam, kao prava ženica, skromna i zadovoljna što me nitko ne tuče. Jer, općenito, svi pisci koji su otišli iz Hrvatske, ili se mislilo da su otišli, od Irene Vrkljan, preko Dubravke Ugrešić, do Predraga Matvejevića, na neki su način marginalizirani. Ne vrednuje ih se u odnosu na njihovo stvaralaštvo, nego u odnosu na njihovu fizičku prisutnost u Hrvatskoj.”

<sup>165</sup> Kovačević, “Yugoslavia,” 308.

<sup>166</sup> Nenad Popović, “Književnici koji nestaju,” *Vijenac* 113 (1998). Croatian: “prodor u svjetsku književnost današnjih hrvatskih pisaca tako podrazumijeva i izgon iz svoje književnosti.”

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “podignut je zid šutnje i ignoriranja. Vani uvažavani kao predstavnici autentične hrvatske pismenosti i duhovnosti, oni doma žive poput duhova.”

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. Croatian: ““stanovnici medijskih rezervata za društveno prezrene.”

While one can certainly sympathise with the perspectives articulated here by Drakulić, Ugrešić, and Popović, it is true that popular writers who have remained in Croatia have also voiced similar complaints. This in turn makes one wonder if—somewhat more prosaically—there is simply a *general* dearth of reviews. There is certainly a general dearth of sales—it was recently reported that in 2008 the top-selling Croatian novel sold 1904 copies—in a country of more than four million people.<sup>169</sup> Like all of the Yugoslav successor states, Croatia is—to use Pascale Casanova’s phrase—a “culture poor in resources,” and in this sense the desperate *mathematics* of reception are impossible to ignore. As Zoran Milutinović asserts, Yugoslavia’s “supra-national, common cultural layer” allowed writers from all over the country to not only acquire a literary patrimony and enter a broader paradigm, but also, and critically for our present purposes, to widen their audience.<sup>170</sup> Today, in spite of the odd patchwork repair, the former pan-Yugoslav system of publishing, distribution, translation, and critique remains in ruins.<sup>171</sup>

## 2.15 Backscratching and Backstabbing

Asked in 2010 for his assessment of the Croatian media reception of local fiction and non-fiction, popular writer Renato Baretić more or less replied that there

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<sup>169</sup> That novel was *Naš čovjek na terenu* (2008, Our man in the field) by Robert Perišić. See Norbert Mappes-Niediek, “Potential market, no buyers,” *Signandsight.com*, July 3, 2011, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/2153.html> [accessed August 17, 2011].

<sup>170</sup> Zoran Milutinović, “What Yugoslav common culture was and how everybody benefitted from it,” paper presented at the symposium “Post-Yugoslav Identities,” University of Nottingham, May 15, 2010. The reference to Casanova is also made by Milutinović.

<sup>171</sup> An absurd example of this is the fact that Slovenian writer Goran Vojnović’s 2008 bestseller (in Slovenia) *Čefurji raus* was published by three different publishers in Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia, in three different translations by three different translators, who gave the novel three different titles. The economics of publishing in this way are simply not viable. With *čefurji* being Slovenian slang for Bosnian and other “immigrants” from the southern Yugoslav republics, in English the title might be something like “Yugo-wogs Out!”

wasn't a piece of newsprint big enough to cover all the vanity, envy, and general back-scratching and backstabbing that went on.<sup>172</sup> In terms of trying to understand Dubravka Ugrešić's (extra-)literary reception in Croatia, the problem is that the archive—whether volumes of literary history or feuilleton pages—is equally unreliable. In her recently published account of the “Witches of Rio” scandal, Ugrešić writes of the untranslatability of so much of what occurs in the Croatian cultural and political context, and the humiliating number of footnotes any attempt requires. “In such a case,” she claims, “attempting translation is like going into battle against Hydra—the translator masochistically agrees to losing in advance.”<sup>173</sup> As I was the English translator of the essay, the irony of this alleged “untranslatability” was and is not lost on me. To recalibrate Hans Robert Jauss's phrase, any reception study in the post-independence Croatian cultural space is a challenge to both literary history and literary theory.

In spite of these difficulties, in moving towards a conclusion I would like to try to bring together the various strands of this chapter as clearly and directly as possible. In the *Globus* magazine of January 22, 2010, an article entitled “Dubravka Ugrešić nije otjerana” [“Dubravka Ugrešić Wasn't Chased Away”] appeared, which was actually an interview with a man by the name of Aleksandar Flaker, Ugrešić's longtime collaborator at the University of Zagreb's Institute for the Theory of Literature.<sup>174</sup> Ugrešić explains the significance and

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<sup>172</sup> Renato Baretić, “Tko je najbolji od pet najboljih,” [“Who Is the Best of the Five Best”], interviewed by V. Vurušić and A. Piteša, *Jutarnji list*, May 13, 2009, <http://www.jutarnji.hr/tko-je-najbolji-od-pet-najboljih-/205343/> [accessed August 1, 2011].

<sup>173</sup> 207.

<sup>174</sup> Aleksandar Flaker, “Dubravka Ugrešić nije otjerana” [“Dubravka Ugrešić Wasn't Chased Away”], interview by Mirjana Dugandžija, *Globus*, January 16, 2010, <http://globus.jutarnji.hr/kultura/dubravka-ugresic-nije-otjerana> [accessed 30 July 2011].

timing of the article:

Why did *Globus* choose the headline “Dubravka Ugrešić Wasn’t Chased Away”? *Globus* needed the professor’s authority to confirm that eighteen years ago its investigative team really was in the right. But why now? A short time before the interview was published, *Globus* lost the lawsuit that it had dragged out for a full seventeen years. Apart from having to pay out a small amount in damages for “burns” I received in the media bonfire, the terms of the settlement also obliged *Globus* to publish the judge’s decision in full. Publishing the ruling would mean a public admission of moral defeat, something *Globus* has successfully avoided for years. Instead, *Globus* published the interview with the professor. The headline—“Dubravka Ugrešić Wasn’t Chased Out”—rings out like a definitive verdict, letting everyone know who wears the pants in the Croatian home.<sup>175</sup>

This recent effort from *Globus* is, however, by no means the only humiliating defeat (snatched from the jaws of at least moral victory) that Ugrešić has had to publicly endure in recent years. In April 2010, Branka Kamenski, whose “Dud Bullet in Rio” was one of the key precursors to Slaven Letica’s “Croatian Feminists Rape Croatia,” celebrated 15 years and 500 episodes of hosting Croatian national television’s cultural bulletin “Pola ure kulture” [“Half Hour of Culture”]. Asked in a hagiographic *Globus* interview about her favourite contemporary Croatian writers, Kamenski stated that she “particularly

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<sup>175</sup> Ugrešić, “A Question of Perspective,” 236. Croatian: “Zašto je redakcija *Globusa* izvukla naslov ‘Dubravka Ugrešić nije otjerana’? *Globusu* je profesorov autoritet zatrebao kao potvrda da je njegov investigativni tim prije osamnaest godina ipak bio u pravu. Ali zašto baš sada? Nešto malo prije objavljivanja intervjua, *Globus* je izgubio sudsku parnicu koja se vukla punih sedamnaest godina. Osim isplate skromne novčane odštete za ‘duševne opekotine’ koje sam zadobila prilikom medijskog spaljivanja, *Globus* je, prema sudskom rješenju, bio obavezan da objavi puni tekst presude. Objaviti tekst presude značilo bi javno priznati moralni poraz, čemu se *Globus* uspješno otima već godinama. Umjesto toga, *Globus* objavljuje intervju s profesorom. Naslov—‘Dubravka Ugrešić nije otjerana’—zvuči kao definitivna sudska presuda. Tek toliko da se zna tko je pravi gazda u hrvatskoj kući” (240).

appreciates” Dubravka Ugrešić, and regards her as “one of our best writers.”<sup>176</sup> Kamenski has forgiven Ugrešić for her essays such as “Clean Croatian Air,” and simply likes books that she remembers—and Ugrešić’s are apparently such books.

In the rest of the interview Kamenski boasts of the show (which Miljenko Jergović dubbed the “gingerbread heart of Croatian culture”) being, in 1996, the first on television to raise the question of dissidents in the new Croatian state. With Kamenski mentioning Dubravka Ugrešić, Slavenka Drakulić, and Slobodan Šnajder, the innocent or amnesiac reader would of course think that Kamenski supported them, when the case was quite the opposite. In a final twist, Kamenski tells of Antun Šoljan being the love of her life, characterises Ugrešić’s denouncer Hloverka Srzić-Novak (a longtime powerbroker at the Croatian national broadcaster) as her “ersatz sister,” while Slaven Letica features among photos of her tennis partners. As Ugrešić concludes, all this

could create the false impression that the “Witches of Rio” affair was simply the concoction of a homespun “cottage industry,” of a group of people who enjoyed media power at the time (which they still enjoy today). The witch-hunt, however, was but one example of a strategy designed to silently and systematically cleanse Croatia of all manner of “internal enemies.” The refusal to acknowledge this fact is still in force today.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Branka Kamenski, “U Torontu sam milijune dolara vrtjela na crno” [“In Toronto I Turned Over Millions Under the Table”], interview by Mirjana Dugandžija, *Globus*, April 6, 2010, <http://globus.jutarnji.hr/zivot/u-torontu-sam-milijune-dolara-vrtjela-na-crno> [accessed July 30, 2011].

<sup>177</sup> Ugrešić, *Karaoke Culture*, 229. Croatian: “mogao bi ostaviti krivi dojam da je lov na pet hrvatskih vještica bio proizvod ‘male kućne radinosti,’ grupe ljudi koji su u tom trenutku imali (a imaju je i danas) medijsku moć. Lov na vještice bio je samo glasan primjer strategije šutljivog, sistematskog i konzekventnog čišćenja Hrvatske od svakovrsnih ‘unutrašnjih neprijatelja.’ Odbijanje konfrontacije s tom činjenicom i danas je na snazi” (232).

It is reasonably clear in literary history that at some point or another, almost all dissident writers, prodigal sons and daughters, are eventually reintegrated into the literary canon of the country they once departed. For Solzhenitsyn, Brodsky, Miłosz, and others it happened in their lifetimes. Joyce kept his spat with Ireland alive for as long as he was, and so reintegration took place in earnest posthumously. For the time being the jury remains out on the cases of Ugrešić and Kundera. As outlined in the chapters that follow, while generally receiving mixed to negative reviews in Croatia, Ugrešić's post-Yugoslav novels have nonetheless been shortlisted for various Croatian literary prizes. For present purposes it is important to note that her most recent collection of essays (*Napad na minibar*, 2010) was in May 2011 awarded the *Vjesnik* Prize for Literature, for the best work of Croatian prose published in the preceding twelve months, *Vjesnik* being a government-owned daily. Like many countries, Croatia has perhaps an excess of literary prizes, and the *Vjesnik* prize has no monetary value, and relatively little symbolic capital. Looked at optimistically and in isolation, one could nevertheless understand Ugrešić's award as a sign that the Croatian cultural space has significantly changed over the past twenty years. It could also be understood as an act of reintegration, as *Vjesnik's* general editor was quick to declare. Ugrešić responded by announcing her intention to donate her award to the Ministry of Culture as part of a future Museum of Croatian Literary Prizes. Mirth aside, Ugrešić's award was somewhat eclipsed by an award made almost concurrently to another Croatian writer.

In late May 2011, Ivan Aralica won the 2010 Vladimir Nazor Prize for lifetime achievement in literature, Croatia's highest state honour of its kind. In the former

Yugoslavia Ivan Aralica was a middling writer of historical novels. With the outbreak of war he shot to prominence when Franjo Tuđman named him as his favourite writer, a blessing that also endowed Aralica with a political career. During the war in Bosnia he became the chief intellectual architect of what he called, with no apparent irony, “humane resettlement”—in practice the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims from majority Croatian areas. In 1997 he published a major novel, *Četverored* (Four abreast), based on the Partisan massacre of Croatian fascists at Bleiburg (today in Austria) in May 1945, aimed at criminalising the Partisan victory in the Second World War (in which Vladimir Nazor participated), and the rehabilitation of the Croatian Ustasha movement. Newspapers reported that the award jury was split 4-3 in favour of Aralica. Andrea Zlatar served as a jury member and afterwards maintained that the selection criteria were exclusively literary, free of political context, and that she wasn't able to comment on her personal preferences.<sup>178</sup> Had she wished to follow in the international footsteps of Carmen Callil vis-à-vis Philip Roth and the Man Booker International Prize a month or so previously, Zlatar could have resigned from the jury, but didn't. In late December 2011, Zlatar became Croatian Minister of Culture in a new centre-left coalition government.

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge that the growing body of Croatian literary scholarship (much of it published abroad) on Dubravka Ugrešić's post-Yugoslav prose has, for the moment, been left on one of the archive's many dusty shelves. As will become apparent in the chapters to follow, the fact that this scholarship

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<sup>178</sup> See Igor Lasić, “Marketinški agent etničkog čišćenja” [“Marketing Agent of Ethnic Cleansing”], *Novosti.com*, May 28, 2011, <http://www.novosti.com/2011/05/marketinski-agent-etnickog-ciscenja/> [accessed 30 June 2011].



tends to be very favourable to Ugrešić appears to confirm that few of us as scholars are prepared to spend time writing about books we don't appreciate in the first place. If we accept this as generally true, as well as the banal reality that scholarly articles have a very modest dissemination, their usefulness in establishing coordinates in Dubravka Ugrešić's reception in Croatia is in any case rather questionable. (Given that this naturally also applies to my own work, the irony of this contention is not lost on me.) Perhaps a more significant omission, however, is how one might measure and theorise the responses of non-readers of Ugrešić's work, who continue to play a disturbingly active role in shaping public opinion towards her.<sup>179</sup> As Michael Hanne has compellingly demonstrated, the protests that erupted across the Middle East following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* were almost exclusively attended by people who hadn't read the book.<sup>180</sup>

Among the disorder of the archive in question, if the preceding narrative has convincingly demonstrated anything, it is the need to consider the marginal position of émigré intellectuals—whether they be writers, filmmakers, musicians or other intellectual or cultural practitioners—in any post-Yugoslav debates over culture. In his essay of aphorisms, “Advice to a Young Writer,” Danilo Kiš memorably reminded the addressee that “warlords fear poets,”<sup>181</sup> yet when we consider the hits Dubravka Ugrešić has taken from “friendly” fire over the past two decades, we might need to revise Kiš's dictum and acknowledge that some

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<sup>179</sup> For example, in his *Globus* interview Aleksandar Flaker admits to not having read anything by Ugrešić since she left Croatia, yet this didn't stop him commenting on its value.

<sup>180</sup> See Michael Hanne, *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1994).

<sup>181</sup> Danilo Kiš, *Život, literatura* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1990), 93. Serbian: “boljari [se] boje pesnika.”

poets appear to have as much to fear from their fellow poets as they do from warlords. To return to Kundera's formulation from the beginning of this chapter, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in curtained enclaves the émigré writer remains peskily hovering on the set of *The History of the Europeans*.

And what of Ugrešić as a "citizen of a ruin," the formulation with which we began? That, it seems, is something on which she and her Croatian critics have long been in agreement. In an open letter to Ugrešić published in the *Vijenac* journal in 1998, a certain Svjetlan Vidulić<sup>182</sup> wrote:

Respected Ms. Ugrešić, to me you come across as a lover of antiquities nostalgically weeping over the ruins of a derelict building, because a historical monument has been destroyed, a witness to a stylistic epoch and the spirit of a time. But the majority of the building's former inhabitants don't want a bar of it. Sure, in the new building nothing is as it should be, but at least the basic construction is somewhat more solid. Renovation of the old ruin wouldn't be worth it even if it could be saved. Besides, they ask you, are you sure about that historical value? And you mutter something about collective amnesia, and your tears are undoubtedly real.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> At the time Vidulić was a junior assistant at the German Department (where Viktor Žmegač was his mentor) at the University of Zagreb, where he is today associate professor.

<sup>183</sup> Svjetlan Vidulić, "Precednik i adventistica: otvoreno pismo Dubravki Ugrešić," *Vijenac* 114 (May 21, 1998), 3. Croatian: "Vi mi, štovana gospodo Ugrešić, dođete kao neka zaljubljenica u starine koja nostalgично plače nad ruševinom trošne zgradurine, jerbo da je uništen povijesni spomenik, svjedok stilske epohe i duha vremena. A većina bivših stanara ne želi o zgradurini više čuti ni riječi. Istina, u novoj nastambi ništa nije kako treba, ali barem je rohbau nešto solidniji. Obnova one starudije ne bi se bila isplatila ni prije konačna urušavanja. Uostalom, pitaju Vas, jeste li sigurni, to sa spomeničkom vrijednosti...? A Vi nešto mrmljate o kolektivnoj amneziji, i Vaše suze nedvojbeno su prave."

### 3. DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ: MUZEJ BEZUVJETNE PREDAJE (1997)

#### 3.1 “No one is the same any more”

In 1993 Ugrešić conceded that were she to write *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* again, it would be different, less cheerful.<sup>1</sup> Near the end of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* the narrator states that “[n]o one is the same any more, I myself have changed. I am quieter, sadder, more preoccupied, less resistant,”<sup>2</sup> and perhaps more than any other, this admission captures the novel’s sadness. In the shadow of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Yugoslav wars, and Ugrešić’s own exile, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and its later companion piece *The Ministry of Pain* form a kind of *fin de siècle* diptych on memory, displacement, melancholia, and nostalgia—an exploration of the symbolic and physical ruins of the European twentieth century.

Originally published in Dutch in 1997, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* appeared in English and German in 1998 and then in several other languages, before finally in 2002 appearing in Croatian, the language in which it was written.<sup>3</sup> In a 2002 interview Ugrešić described it as “a collage or installation

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<sup>1</sup> See Ugrešić, *Forsiranje romana-reke*, 219.

<sup>2</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 227. Croatian: “Nitko više nije isti, i sama sam se promijenila. Tiša sam, sjetnija, odsutnija, nerezistentnija” (277).

<sup>3</sup> With financial support from the Ministries of Culture of both Croatia and Serbia, the novel was jointly published in Zagreb and Belgrade (by two different publishers) as part of a series of eight of Ugrešić’s works, which also included her four works of Yugoslav-era fiction and three post-Yugoslav essay collections, one of which, *Zabranjeno čitanje* (translated as *Thank You for Not Reading*), was appearing for the first time in Croatian. As Ugrešić reminded a number of local interviewers at the time, the publishing project was not a definitive collection of her work, omitting as it did both her writings for children and her scholarly monograph. The Croatian editions varied from those in Serbia only in that they were sheathed in a paper overleaf. The collection’s 2002 publication coincided with the 2000-2003 mandate of a centre-left coalition in Croatia. The fact that Ugrešić made a kind of Great Return to the literary milieu she had departed

novel, constructed from various fragments and stories linked not by any fabulative principle, but thematically: each fragment, as in a collage, underpins and gives meaning to the next.”<sup>4</sup> In describing the novel in language more commonly associated with the visual arts, Ugrešić hints not only at its shattered narrative, but also at its many instances of ekphrasis, extended reflections on the “twilight art” (Sontag) of photography, and the amateur curatorial impulses of both autobiography and family photo albums.

Consisting of seven parts, the novel’s four odd-numbered chapters are narrated from post-*Wende* Berlin, carry German titles and contain numbered *aperçus*—modernist miniatures<sup>5</sup>—while the longer even-numbered chapters recall people, events, and memories situated in what was Yugoslavia. Structurally the novel bears an uncanny resemblance to Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, both of which are also based on seven-part structures, with the former haunting the text thematically.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Hana Pichova’s observation with regard to Kundera’s two novels, that “events, scenes, and sentences are sometimes repeated verbatim or with only slight variations, as well as in the broader structural organization of the novel”<sup>7</sup> applies equally well

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“on her own broom” during the first break from the nationalist rule of Franjo Tuđman offers further confirmation of her contested place in Croatian cultural life. On the other hand, it bears remembering that much literary publishing throughout the former Yugoslavia is only possible with the help of state subventions.

<sup>4</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, “Evolucija egzila” [“The Evolution of Exile”], interview by Muharem Bazdulj, *Feral Tribune*, October 31, 2002. Croatian: “Muzej bezuvjetne predaje’ je roman-kolaž ili roman-instalacija, sastavljen od raznoraznih fragmenata i priča, koji se povezuje ne prema fabulativnom, nego prema tematskom principu: svaki fragment, baš kao u kolažu, podupire i osmišljava onaj drugi.”

<sup>5</sup> See Andreas Huyssen, “Modernist Miniatures: Literary Snapshots of Urban Space,” *PMLA* 122, no. 1 (January 2007): 27-42.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Kundera’s fondness for seven-part structures, see his discursions in *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 85-95.

<sup>7</sup> Hana Pichova, *The Arts of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 64.

to *Museum*. Ugrešić's constant use of repetition forces us to concentrate on what we have read and what we remember, whether something is an exact repetition or has been modified, putting us face-to-face with the possibilities and limitations of our own "technologies of memory."

The novel's prologue begins with the unnamed narrator, a Croatian exile, examining a bizarre exhibit at the Berlin Zoo. Under glass lie the excavated stomach contents of a walrus named Roland who died on 21 August 1961, eight days after construction of the Wall began, the display consisting of

[a] pink cigarette lighter, four ice-lolly sticks (wooden), a metal brooch in the form of a poodle, a beer-bottle opener, a woman's bracelet (probably silver), a hair grip, a wooden pencil, a child's plastic water pistol, a plastic knife, sunglasses, a little chain, a spring (small), a rubber ring, a parachute (child's toy), a steel chain about 40 cm in length, four nails (large), a green plastic car, a metal comb, a plastic badge, a small doll, a beer can (Pilsner, 330 ml), a box of matches, a baby's shoe, a compass, a car key, four coins, a knife with a wooden handle, a baby's dummy, a bunch of keys (5), a padlock, a little plastic bag containing needles and thread.<sup>8</sup>

Dominated by plastic, this "mini-museum of European culture from the middle of the twentieth century"<sup>9</sup> represents the first of the novel's series of archaeological exhibits of vanished everydays. Opening in this way, Ugrešić signals the museum, a critical postmodern topos, as the novel's central trope. From the Kandinsky and

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<sup>8</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, n.p. Croatian: "Upaljač roza boje, četiri štapića od sladoleda (drvena), metalni broš u obliku pudlice, otvarač za pivske boce, ženska narukvica (vjerojatno srebrna), kopča za kosu, drvena olovka, plastični dječji pištolj na vodu, plastični nož, sunčane naočale, lančić, opruga (manja), gumeni kolut, padobran (dječja igračka), željezni lanac cca 40 cm, četiri čavla (velika), plastični automobil zelene boje, metalni češalj, plastični bedž, lutkica, pivska limenka (Pilsner, 0,33 l), kutija šibica, dječja papuča, kompas, automobilski ključ, četiri novčića, nož s drvenom drškom, duda-varalica, svežanj ključeva (5 kom.), lokot, plastična torbica za igle i konac" (n.p.).

<sup>9</sup> Celia Hawkesworth, "Vrijeme i mjesto u djelima Dubravke Ugrešić," in *Čovjek, Prostor, Vrijeme: Književnoantropološke studije iz hrvatske književnosti*, eds. Živa Benčić and Dunja Fališevac (Zagreb: Disput, 2006), 439. Croatian: "mini-muzej europske kulture iz sredine dvadesetog stoljeća."

Odön von Horváth museums, to the Sugar, Hairstyle, and Toy Bear museums, the novel is littered with references to the museums of Berlin. Built on the ruins of the twentieth century, Berlin appears not only as a city of museums and a city that is itself a museum, but also as the physical embodiment of Europe's almost half-century divide, reified in the museum in the former East Berlin from which the novel, in an amended form of its Russian name, takes its title.<sup>10</sup>

In opening the novel at the Zoo, Ugrešić likewise puts us on notice that the work will be criss-crossed with significant intertexts, in this case, Nabokov's "Guide to Berlin"<sup>11</sup> and Viktor Shklovsky's epistolary novel *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love*,<sup>12</sup> both of which she later cites. Frequent visitors to the Zoo, which is located near the heart of Berlin's Russian enclave, both writers gave literary testimony to the unfortunate similarities between the post-Revolution Russian diaspora and the Zoo's caged inhabitants. In the same way as Berlin once provided refuge to Shklovsky, Nabokov, and others,<sup>13</sup> post-*Wende*, the city fated to be an island again provides higher ground to east Europeans washed up by new, different, revolutions. At one point the narrator thinks of herself as "a weary human

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<sup>10</sup> In German the museum was simply referred to as *Gedenkstätte Karlshorst* (the Karlshorst Memorial).

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, "A Guide to Berlin," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage International, 1997), 155-160.

<sup>12</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love*, ed. and trans. Richard Sheldon (London: Cornell University Press, 1971).

<sup>13</sup> As indicated in the previous chapter, while intertextuality has always featured prominently in Ugrešić's fiction, Hawkesworth notes that her earlier ribbing of writers as "one big family" has been replaced by a more serious tone, and that her frequent references to and citations of other (predominantly exiled east European) writers in her post-Yugoslav work are an attempt to establish a dialogue with those writers with whom she shares a commonality of experience and feels a particular affinity (see Hawkesworth, "Vrijeme i mjesto," 434). As I shall argue later, Ugrešić likewise uses citations by these writers to offer meta-descriptions of aspects of the novel itself.

specimen, a pebble . . . cast by chance on to a different, safer shore.”<sup>14</sup> At another she declares, “I’m shipwrecked, I come from Atlantis.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps most dramatically, however, the display of Roland’s excavated stomach contents signals the novel’s surrealist obsession with the art of collecting, juxtaposition, and the border between the imagined and the real. In assembling photographs, quotations, diary entries, the bric-a-brac of postcommunist flea markets—the physical and metaphysical junk of personal and historical epochs—the narrator, a postcommunist *flâneuse*, inherits the tradition of Baudelaire’s ragpicker, one who, in Sontag’s phrase, seeks to make “a history out of our detritus.”<sup>16</sup> From the narrator’s saturnine temperament and stockpiling of quotations, to the leitmotifs of angels, maps, and photography, the spectre of Walter Benjamin, another avid collector and onetime resident of Berlin who enjoyed childhood visits to the Zoo, is never far away.

Finally, the novel’s preface categorically puts us on notice that “the question of whether this novel is autobiographical might at some hypothetical moment be of concern to the police, but not to the reader.”<sup>17</sup> In placing the declaration in the mouth of her narrator, Ugrešić reaffirms her long-held belief in the autonomy

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<sup>14</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 11. Croatian: “ja sam umorni ljudski primjerak, kamenščica, slučaj me, eto, izbacio na drugu, sigurniju obalu” (23).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 105. This sentence does not appear in the Croatian edition of the novel.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 68. Sontag quotes Baudelaire’s description of the ragpicker: “Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects . . . He sorts things out and makes a wise choice; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, the refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry” (78). She also reminds us that “it was Breton and other Surrealists who invented the secondhand store as a temple of vanguard taste and upgraded visits to flea markets into a mode of aesthetic pilgrimage. The Surrealist ragpicker’s acuity was directed to finding beautiful what other people found ugly or without interest and relevance—bric-a-brac, naïve or pop objects, urban debris” (79).

<sup>17</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, n.p. Croatian: “pitanje je li ovaj roman autobiografski moglo bi u nekom eventualnom, hipotetičnom trenutku spadati u nadležnost policije, ali ne i čitalaca” (n.p.).

and non-referentiality of literature, gracefully getting her retaliation in first against any attempt to read the novel as autofiction or *roman-à-clef*. Given the many obvious—and deliberate—similarities between Ugrešić's real biography and the fictional episodes in the novel, it is nonetheless a declaration many commentators, unmoved by the distinction between life and art, have found difficult to honour. On this matter we might concede that while playing "literary policemen" (they who task themselves with separating "truth" from fiction) may occasionally have its guilty pleasures, it's hardly a game for the vast majority of readers who know nothing of a writer's biography—and most likely care even less. Moreover, as Nebojša Jovanović suggests, such games make a mockery of the narcissistic illusion that one's love for *belles lettres* is exalted or noble,<sup>18</sup> an illusion scholars might be well advised to try and maintain.

From these tentative observations it is apparent that any easy overview of what *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is "about" is rather difficult. In its very structure the novel exemplifies the random, fragmented, achronological technologies of memory central to its concerns. In releasing multiple leitmotifs in the least expected places, Ugrešić sends us scrambling after thematic and affective threads, diegetic and mimetic balls of wool that mercilessly intersect and entangle. Aware that the novel demands much from its reader, in the prefatory note the narrator urges patience, gently reassuring us that "connections will establish themselves of their own accord."<sup>19</sup> As Monica Popescu writes, like Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," the novel

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<sup>18</sup> See Nebojša Jovanović, "Motiv tri žene u *Muzej beuvjetne predaje* Dubravke Ugrešić," *Reč* 74 (2006): 107.

<sup>19</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, n.p. Croatian: "veze će se postepeno uspostavljati same" (n.p.).



uses the vignette as its *modus operandi* in an “attempt to make sense of history without imposing a totalizing narrative.”<sup>20</sup>

As complex as the novel is, however, much criticism and scholarship has often moved to frame the novel as a “mourning work” for Yugoslavia, a kind of *À la recherche d’un pays perdu*.<sup>21</sup> While the *Wende* of 1989 and the later Yugoslav disintegration may “pull the threads” of the novel’s central concerns, the losses it goes in search of far surpass the Yugoslav chronotope. In the intimacy of Proustian familial recollections and in diegesis and mimesis of the blizzards of historical loss, many of the novel’s vignettes venture deep into the *temps perdu* of the European twentieth century. As readers we wander through the novel’s many different museal rooms, surprised to recognise that many of them are ours too.

Following the First World War, Kurt Schwitters maintained that the turmoil of war had made what he had learned at the academy redundant, and that the only thing left was to try and make something new from the ruins that remained. He dubbed the collage form he created to give voice to this turmoil *Merz*—a word he invented—and in this respect, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* can be understood as Ugrešić’s *Merz* novel. Remaining within the semantic field of art, my reading of the novel suggests that with Ugrešić in the role of meta-curator, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is best read as a kind of meta-museum—

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<sup>20</sup> Monica Popescu, “Imagining the Past: Cultural Memory in Dubravka Ugrešić’s ‘The Museum of Unconditional Surrender,’” *Studies in the Novel* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 348.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Sanja Bahun, “There Was Once A Country: An Impossible Chronotope in the Writings of Slavenka Drakulić and Dubravka Ugrešić,” *The European Journal of English Studies* 14, no. 1 (April 2010): 63-74.

a museum of museums, a collection of collections, and a collection of collectors—and as a work eerily in tune with prevailing museal discourse.

Andreas Huyssen describes “[t]he success of the museum” as possibly “one of the salient symptoms of Western culture in the 1980s,” a time when “[t]he planned obsolescence of consumer society found its counterpoint in a relentless museummania.”<sup>22</sup> As he contends, invigorated by the epochal passage from modernity to postmodernity, the museum “perhaps for the first time in the history of avant-garde” changed “its role from whipping boy to favourite son in the family of cultural institutions.”<sup>23</sup> Here, Huyssen calls time on the debate over the museum as “the privileged institutional site of the three centuries old ‘*querelle des anciens et des modernes*,’”<sup>24</sup> and concomitantly, on the traditional avant-gardist critique of the museum as an ossifying, reifying, and hegemonic force. As Huyssen suggests, in a time of profound museummania “the avant-garde’s museumophobia, its collapsing of the museal project with mummification and necrophilia . . . belongs itself to the museum.”<sup>25</sup>

Featuring private and public exhibitions and (mini-)museums of the most diverse kinds, and featuring extended ekphrasis of art works by various “archaeologists of the everyday” such as Ilya Kabakov, Christian Boltanski, and Richard Wentworth, Ugrešić’s novel supports Huyssen’s contention that we live in “an age that does not offer any clear consensus as to what actually belongs in a

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<sup>22</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

museum.”<sup>26</sup> Industrial, technological, and quotidian articles are, more than ever, legitimate museal projects, a legitimization ironically made possible by “the avant-gardist blurring of the boundaries between art and life, high culture and its various others.”<sup>27</sup> In Huyssen’s general account, “[t]he popularity of the museum is . . . a major cultural symptom of the crisis of the Western faith in modernization as panacea.”<sup>28</sup> The specific museal sensibility of Ugrešić’s novel appears, *inter alia*, to be born of a crisis of faith in the end of communism and as panacea for the torments of twentieth-century Europe, and the fear that the Yugoslav everyday is disappearing before it has had a chance to be evaluated and musealised.

Writing in the millennial year of 2000, Huyssen maintained that the “memory boom” of recent decades, “a turning toward the past” stands “in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of early decades of twentieth-century modernity.”<sup>29</sup> Unlike the forward-looking heroines of post-WWII *Trümmerfilm*, relentlessly striving to construct the future, Ugrešić’s narrator, terrified and helpless, far more resembles Paul Klee’s backward-looking *Angelus Novus*, immortalized by Benjamin.<sup>30</sup> Blown forth by the storm of progress—allegorically, the end of communism and the violently “progressive” end of Yugoslavia—the narrator looks back at the twentieth century and sees only ruins, which as memory fragments and museum exhibits she piles up before us. And she does so in the apparent conviction that, as Huyssen puts it, “our culture

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257-58.

is terminally ill with amnesia,"<sup>31</sup> a conviction that rings particularly true in the context of the dismembered Yugoslavia, whence the narrator has been blown.

### 3.2 Berlin

The novel's first numbered aperçu begins with the narrator explaining to the reader (that) "*Ich bin müde* is the only German sentence I know at the moment. And right now I don't want to learn any more. Learning more means opening up. And I want to stay closed for a while longer."<sup>32</sup> The desire to remain closed is both a deferral of any reckoning with her newfound deracination, and, in Freud's distinction, a refusal to begin the work of mourning in order to preserve the pain of melancholia.<sup>33</sup> Mourning her exilic dislocation would risk overcoming its trauma, a process perversely linked with forgetting, which is negatively signified in the scheme of the novel. In choosing to remain in the world of her own language, the only language the narrator masters is that of "human loneliness," and indeed, the Berlin of the novel is a lonely place, a narcoleptic city where almost everyone suffers from acedia and yet nobody has any time. As a later Shklovsky citation reads: "Bitter is the anguish of being in Berlin, as bitter as carbide dust."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 5. Croatian: "*Ich bin müde* jedina je njemačka rečenica koju zasada znam. U ovom trenutku i ne želim naučiti više. Naučiti više znači otvoriti se. A ja još neko vrijeme želim ostati zatvorenom" (15).

<sup>33</sup> See Freud's seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), 584-589.

<sup>34</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 107. Croatian: "*Berlinska tuga je gorka kao karbidska prašina*" (131).

In the narrator's building we meet Berlin's many east European *Trümmerleute*, themselves "museum exhibits."<sup>35</sup> Kira, a retired teacher of literature from Kiev, gently murmurs *Nanizivat, ja ljublju nanizivat*—"threading, I like threading things"—an apparent attempt to locate and gather her fugitive pieces. Smiling "the pale smile of a convalescent,"<sup>36</sup> Kira observes of the other residents, who include a Russian writer, a German writer, and a Romanian artist couple: "You know, we're all alike in a way, we are all looking for something . . . As though we had lost something."<sup>37</sup> Having been taunted with the epithet "Bulgie" as a little girl (due to her Bulgarian mother), the narrator recalls having unwittingly learnt the sad letters of "the Braille of Eastern Europe" by the age of seven, and this ability of "Easterners" to recognise and (often) empathise with one another is constantly rearticulated.

In Munich's Marienplatz the narrator scuttles to a phone booth to escape a Gypsy violinist who recognises her as "one of his," only to be forced to wait in line behind a greasemonkey whom she recognises as "one of hers."<sup>38</sup> Pretending to be an Italian, an Iranian waiter serves the narrator at an Italian restaurant, addressing her in fluent Croatian with a heavy Bosnian accent, having once studied in Sarajevo. Kašmir R., a former lawyer and Bosnian Muslim refugee who lives with his mother in a Berlin *Heim* wanders the predominantly Turkish neighbourhood of Kreuzberg. At weekends he and his mother trudge the city's

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<sup>35</sup> The suggestion is made by narrator's friend Zoran (231; *Muzej*, 281).

<sup>36</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 12. Croatian: "blijedim smiješkom rekonvalescenta" (24).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. Croatian: "Znate, ovdje smo svi na neki način slični, svi nešto tražimo, kao da smo nešto izgubili" (21).

<sup>38</sup> Ugrešić mines her non-fiction for use in the novel on a number of occasions. This encounter, for example, is borrowed almost word-for-word from *The Culture of Lies*.

flea markets to meet their people, the “museum race”<sup>39</sup> of former Yugoslavs and other east Europeans who belong to same world of yesterday as the obsolete flotsam and jetsam they buy and sell. Later the narrator observes a young Polish prostitute walking anxiously in front of the Café Einstein, and in the bars of Kurfürstenstrasse a young Croatian male prostitute, in Berlin avoiding the draft. And as if in a slideshow jammed on repeat, intermittent snapshots of Alaga, a toothless Gypsy from the Zagreb suburb of Dubrava, and of a young amputee with a cardboard sign that states *Ich bin aus Bosnien*, appear, disappear, and reappear throughout the novel.

We meet the intermittently suicidal—and inevitably dipsomaniac and peripatetic—Christa, with whom the narrator bonds in the kitchen of a rented American apartment. We learn of her Medea complex, multiple love affairs, and attempts—in Iceland, America, Poland, and even on an Adriatic island—to find a surrogate for East Germany, her “one true homeland” from which she was expelled. Christa, the narrator writes, has spent much of her life “tormented by two nightmares . . . one was insoluble and the other . . . soluble,”<sup>40</sup> the first being the Berlin Wall, the second, “Home.” The narrator confesses that although she had noted down Christa’s story several years before the fall of the Wall, only later did the story reveal its “secret topography.” Christa’s twin nightmares have become the narrator’s own. As Christa once did in the direction of the east, the narrator imagines climbing invisible observation posts, shaking her fist towards the south, at the walls that have sprung up in her former homeland.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 232. Croatian: “muzejska rasa” (283).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 143. Croatian: “okrit ću da Christu opsjedaju dva košmara . . . jedan je bio nerješiv, a drugi rješiv” (178).

In one of the novel's most poignant episodes, the narrator visits the basement café of the *Muzey istorii bezogovorochnoj kapitulatsii fashistskoy Germanii v voyne 1941-45* ("the Museum of the History of the Unconditional Capitulation of Fascist Germany in the War 1941-45"), the building in which Nazi Germany signed its capitulation. While her beaten ex-Yugoslav countrymen play chess or cards, and drink coffee, a teenage Moldovan stands guard outside the derelict Soviet barracks surrounding the museum, a "[m]useum exhibit. A former soldier guarding a former barracks."<sup>41</sup> The narrator notes how she is visiting the museum just as it is about to be permanently closed, and indeed, the museum did close in 1994, only to re-open in 1995 with the historically retouched name, the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst. Given that Ugrešić's novel was not published until 1997, it appears she elegiacally—and deliberately—named it for a place that no longer existed.

I visited the museum on a Saturday spring morning in 2010. The barracks surrounding the museum had largely been torn down, and the Soviet officers' quarters next door to the museum were being converted into luxury apartments. I couldn't help the thought that I was witnessing another kind of unconditional surrender, this time of communism to capitalism. The Russian waitress of the novel who served coffee in Georgian coffee pots (reminding the ex-Yugoslavs of the Bosnian *džezva*) had been replaced with a coffee machine, around which a busload of (west) German tourists huddled on arrival. Apart from a gentleman in the carpark changing his station wagon tires, they were the only visitors I saw.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 232. Croatian: "Muzejski primjerak. Bivši vojnik čuva bivšu kasarnu" (282).

Like the cast of Berlin-based artists she meets, the narrator frequently reveals her own surrealist sensibility, the descriptive montages she creates from scenes at the Berlin Zoo striking. Gazelles, antelope, and zebras are set against the backdrop of the Berlin Intercontinental hotel, lions roar in the direction of the Grundkredit bank, trains and cars race past rhinoceros, pink flamingos are framed by railway viaducts. Yet her most emblematic juxtaposition is the recurring sight of the statue of Victoria, the Roman goddess of victory (on whom angels congregate in Wenders' *Der Himmer über Berlin*<sup>42</sup>) that sits atop the *Siegessäule* (the Berlin Victory Column), and the three-pointed Mercedes star mounted on its own perch atop the shopping mecca of the Europa Centre. These "two glinting gods, on opposite sides of the city monitor its heart, its pulse"<sup>43</sup> perfectly symbolizing the schizophrenia of Janus-faced Berlin, "one which wants to forget and the other which wants to remember."<sup>44</sup>

Originally conceived to commemorate Prussian victory in the 1864 Danish-Prussian war, by the time of its final inauguration (in 1873) the Victory Column had come to symbolise much more. Following Prussian victories against Austria (1866) and France (1870-71)—known as the wars of unification—the statue of Victoria was added. In the newly reunified Berlin of the novel, Victoria's place in commemoration and "unification" appears to have been usurped by the Mercedes star. As the novel closes, from a treadmill in a JOOP fitness centre the

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<sup>42</sup> A passage from the movie, the screenplay for which was written by Wenders and Austrian writer, Peter Handke, introduces the fourth part of the novel (see *Museum*, 115; *Muzej*, 143).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 108. Croatian: "dva svijetleća božanstva, svatko na svojoj strani, kontroliraju srce grada, mjere njegov puls" (132). A closer English translation of the passage would be "two glinting gods, each on its own side, monitor the city's heart, measure its pulse." The difficulty with the published translation is that it clearly locates the state of Victoria and the Mercedes star on different sides of Berlin, i.e. east and west. In reality both are located in the former West Berlin.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 241. Croatian: "jedan koji se trudi da zaboravi i drugi koji se trudi da pamti" (294).



narrator looks out at this “metal goddess [which] like a laser strokes the rough scars of the city, reconciles times and the different sides of the world, the past and the present, West and East.”<sup>45</sup> Yet with all the star implies about wealth, prosperity, and technological advancement, at ground level the narrator looks down and sees Alaga, the toothless Gypsy from the Zagreb suburb of Dubrava, banging away on her miniature synthesiser, a blemish on the fantasy of East-West reconciliation based on the stupor of commerce.

As Huyssen has it, post-unification Berlin was “primarily a memory space, haunted by the ghosts of its past . . . the centre of a discontinuous, ruptured history, city of the collapse of four successive German states,”<sup>46</sup> a prototypical “urban imaginary”—a place where “strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias.”<sup>47</sup> Ugrešić’s narrator offers multiple iterations of the struggle of the two Berlins—the forgetting and the remembering. From the refuge of the “glass bowl” of her fitness centre, the narrator looks down on the destroyed dome of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church, as compelling evidence as any of the ruin as “a standstill dialectic.”<sup>48</sup> Enjoying champagne and prawn cocktails behind the glass cupola atop the luxury KaDeWe department store, the narrator spots the plaque on Wittenbergplatz bearing the names of German concentration camps. Peeling posters of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Tse Tung appear locked in an interminable death roll with a sparkingly lit BMW dealership on Ku’damm. The young

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 247. Croatian: “Metalno božanstvo poput lasera zaglađuje grube ožiljke grada, pomiruje vremena i strane svijeta, prošlost i sadašnjost, Istok i Zapad” (302).

<sup>46</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 77.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>48</sup> Boym, *Nostalgia*, 208.

Germans revelling in the cafes of the Scheunenviertel, “white Jamaicans with their hair woven into innumerable tiny plaits [who] pass through the streets thick with the shadows of vanished lives like angels,”<sup>49</sup> seem unaware of the “sadness of Berlin [that] comes from the asphalt,”<sup>50</sup> the dangers of *flânerie* in a city built on ruins.

In the novel’s imaginary of Berlin, as if in a latter-day Pompeii, one must walk with care lest one fall through someone’s roof, or slip through the asphalt’s thin crust into piles of human bones. The narrator likens Berlin to Teufelsberg, the city’s highest landmass, under which 100 million tonnes of ruins from the Second World War lie buried, “ruins covered with indifferent grass.” Berlin is a city “sodden with the moisture of madness,” which “just like damp, cannot easily be concealed.”<sup>51</sup> Although the city’s oldest Jewish cemetery in Schönhauser Allee is blanketed in ivy, the ruins of headstones smashed by the Nazis are no less easily concealed. As Huyssen remarks with regard to work by Sebald and Spiegelman, “contrary to the belief of many historians, representations of the visible will always show residues and traces of the invisible.”<sup>52</sup> Having walked past the cemetery almost weekly for well over a year, I finally visited it in the summer of 2011. It could have been the rainy, unseasonably cold July day, and it could have been the yarmulke male visitors are required to wear, but the ivy-covered gravestones lying where they had fallen over seven decades previously offered a

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 111. Croatian: “bijeli Jamajčani s kosom ispletenom u pletenice prolaze ulicama gustim od sjena iščezlih života, poput anđela” (136).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 175. Croatian: “Tuga Berlina dolazi iz asfalta” (218).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 176. Croatian: “Berlin je Teufelsberg, kažem, ruševine prekrivene ravnodušnom travom. Berlin je natopljen vlagom ludila . . . Ludilo se, međutim, kao i vlaga, teško može sakriti” (218).

<sup>52</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 10.

far more visceral sense of the dead haunting the living than the architectural spectacle of the Daniel Libeskind-designed Jewish Museum.

Described as a “mutant” or “transvestite” city, in Ugrešić’s literary imagination Berlin appears as the novel’s central metaphor for a reunified Europe. The city’s twin faces are even present in the names of cafes: there is a Café Kant and a Café Hegel, Hegel written in both the latin and cyrillic alphabets (the cyrillic side turned towards an adjacent brothel); in the former East Berlin suburb of Prenzlauer Berg, Café Pasternak faces the water tower that once served as a detention centre for Berlin Jews; Café Exile and Café Konsulat face off at one another across a canal. Seen through the prism of Berlin, East and West are essentially antithetical, one on the ascendancy means the other in decline.

Berlin is also a city “criss-crossed by the hologram reflection of some other cities”<sup>53</sup>—Kreuzberg merges with a corner of Istanbul, and the farthest reaches of the S-Bahn with the periphery of Moscow. As Huyssen observes, in the debate over Berlin’s architectural future, the architecture of the GDR, “which many would just like to commit in its entirety to the wrecking ball”<sup>54</sup> was fated to be ignored. Having “lost their grounding in socialist notions of collective living,”<sup>55</sup> the city’s eastern housing projects such as Marzahn, Hohenschönhausen, and Hellersdorf are incompatible with the imagology of the new Berlin. Writing in 2000 Huyssen suggested that only time would tell “[w]hether they will stand as ruins of socialism and urban decay or whether they can be modified in some

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 110. Croatian: “presijavaju se hologramski odbljesci nekih drugih gradova” (135).

<sup>54</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 61.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 83.

creative form.”<sup>56</sup> At the time of my writing, the “solution” has been far more prosaic. At least from the exterior, the tower blocks in question have almost all been renovated. So far removed from any path down which a tourist might stray, they are excluded from the city’s Cinderella-like costume change. If Berlin is indeed “poor but sexy” (a phrase coined by mayor Klaus Wowereit and now repeated ad nauseam), the *Plattenbauten* of the periphery have all the attributes of the former and none of the latter.

The strange commodification of Europe’s division is taken to its most extreme in the piece of the Wall placed under museum glass in the courtyard of the Europa Centre, which visitors to the shopping centre observe with wonder “as though they were seeing it for the first time.”<sup>57</sup> In this way the Europa Centre is presented as a metaphor for the true nature of East-West relations. The erection and fall of the Wall, life-defining historical events for hundreds of millions of east Europeans, have already been forgotten. In this regard, Boym reminds us of Pierre Nora’s suggestion that “memorial sites, or ‘lieux de mémoire’ are established institutionally when the environments of memory, the *milieux de mémoire*, fade,”<sup>58</sup> and that “the obsession with the past . . . takes place in inverse proportion to its actual preservation.”<sup>59</sup> All of this notwithstanding, the particular *lieu de mémoire* in question—the piece of the Wall encased in glass in the courtyard of the Europa Centre—is today no longer there either.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 233. Croatian: “kao da ga prvi put vide” (283).

<sup>58</sup> Boym, *Nostalgia*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Nora's *pensée* takes on a new meaning when the narrator views objects from (both east and west) German everyday life in the German Historical Museum and realizes, as if for the first time, that the detonated Yugoslav everyday will never have a museum, for

[i]f the country has disappeared, then so will collective memory. If the objects that surrounded us have disappeared, then so will the memory of the everyday life that we lived. Memory of the former country is forbidden. And when one day the ban is lifted, in the meantime everyone will have forgotten. There'll be nothing left to remember.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout eastern Europe the *Wende* may have made museum exhibits of entire populations, but at least they will have their museums—even the *versunkener Staat* (“sunken state”) of the German Democratic Republic. Supranational Yugoslav places and milieux of memory, however, will never be memorialized, musealised, or commemorated, putting the Yugoslav past outside the predictions in a cited passage from Nabokov's “Guide to Berlin,” in which he writes of how all things obsolete and surpassed eventually become museum pieces. Given that this does not hold true for the disappeared Yugoslavia, Ugrešić's novel appears to take up Nabokov's suggestion that “the sense of literary creation” is

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<sup>60</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 243. Croatian: “Ali ako je zemlja nestala, nestat će i kolektivno pamćenje. Ako su nestali predmeti koji su nas okruživali, nestat će i sjećanje na svakidašnjicu koju smo živjeli. Sjećanje na bivšu zemlju je zabranjeno. A kada jednoga dana zabrana prestane, svi će u međuvremenu zaboraviti. Neće se više imati čega sjećati” (297). Here it needs to be noted that in Belgrade there is actually a Museum of Yugoslav History, created in 1996 as the successor to the May 25th Museum. Given that cultural ties between almost all of the former Yugoslav republics remain somewhat strained, little claim can be made for the museum as a true pan-Yugoslav institution.

to portray objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right.<sup>61</sup>

### 3.3 Art and Ekphrasis

While in other sections of the novel Ugrešić thematizes the selectivity of memory inherent in the curation of family photo albums, the fragility of (auto)biography, and the pressures against personal, collective, and official memory in times of historical caesura, the Berlin sections of the novel feature frequent slides into ekphrasis, the description of works of art and the *lieux* and *milieux de mémoire* they commemorate. Continuing her interest in the Russian avant-garde OBERIU circle from her Yugoslav-era fiction and scholarship, Ugrešić has her narrator cite a character from Konstantin Vaginov's novel *Harpagoniana*, who claims that "[c]lassification is one of the most creative activities' . . . 'essentially classification shapes the world. Without classification there would be no memory. Without classification it would be impossible to imagine reality.'"<sup>62</sup> The original Croatian for "imagine reality"—*osmisliti zbilju*—is loaded with stronger connotations, with *osmisliti* an expansive verb suggesting "to think/work out; organize theoretically/intellectually; give meaning to, imbue with meaning, make meaningful, make sense of, figure out; make relevant."<sup>63</sup> This more exhaustive definition seems to capture the narrator's quest to understand how the fall of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 171-2. Croatian: "opisati obične stvari onako kako će se one odraziti u ljubaznim zrcalima budućih vremena, nalaziti u njima onu mirisavu nježnost koju će moći osjetiti samo naši potomci u budućnosti, kada će svaka sitnica naše svakidašnjice postati sama po sebi lijepom i prazničnom" (213).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38. Croatian: "'Klasifikacija je jedna od najkreativnijih djelatnosti . . . klasifikacija je, u biti, oblikovanje svijeta. Bez klasifikacije ne bi bilo ni sjećanja. Bez klasifikacije ne bi bilo moguće osmisliti zbilju'" (54).

<sup>63</sup> Željko Bujas, *Veliki hrvatsko-engleski rječnik* (Zagreb: Nakladni Zavod Globus, 2001), 990.

Berlin Wall and the wars in the former Yugoslavia have made “museum exhibits” of entire populations.

The novel’s most detailed ekphrastic instances centre on the work of Russian artist, Ilya Kabakov, whom the narrator refers to as “the unacknowledged king of rubbish,”<sup>64</sup> a descendant of other archaeologists of the everyday, including Kurt Schwitters, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol.<sup>65</sup> As an archaeologist of the (now vanished) Soviet everyday, Kabakov is, in Sontag’s phrase, one “engaged in a pious work of salvage.”<sup>66</sup> The narrator describes his hyperrealist paintings of iconic Soviet images and careful copying and magnifying of train timetables and house rules as an ironic take on socialist realism, and given his minimal artistic intervention, a meta-description of its tenets and content. According to Kabakov, the group “always dreamed of making projects that would say everything about everything,”<sup>67</sup> a project and ambition that one can’t help thinking also belongs to Ugrešić in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Boym suggests that in voluntary exile in the West following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kabakov

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<sup>64</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 37. Croatian: “Nalazila sam se u odajama nepriznata kralja smeća” (54-55). Ugrešić frequently returns to Kabakov throughout her writings, including. In the introduction to the anthology of alternative Russian prose she edited—*Pljuska u ruci* (Zagreb: August Cesarec, 1989)—she offers a detailed scholarly analysis of a number of the works mentioned in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*.

<sup>65</sup> As Boym outlines, in the 1970s and 1980s, Kabakov was a key figure in NOMA, a Moscow-based movement of “Romantic Conceptualism,” which she describes as “not so much an artistic school, but a subculture and a way of life,” one that “continued the twentieth-century tradition of art-making as a lifestyle and a form of resistance.” Following the introduction of the Brezhnev Doctrine and the ensuing clampdown on cultural life, the conceptualist group of artists, writers, and intellectuals created “a kind of parallel existence in a gray zone,” an existence located in “a ‘stolen space’ carved out between Soviet institutions.” Unlike their American counterparts Warhol and Rauschenberg, who appropriated and subverted the symbols and iconography of advertising and consumer goods, the NOMA group took as their material the quotidian membra of the Soviet everyday. See Svetlana Boym, “Ilya Kabakov: The Soviet Toilet and the Palace of Utopias,” *Artmargins.com*, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/435-ilya-kabakov-the-soviet-toilet-and-the-palace-of-utopias> [accessed 13 July 2011].

<sup>66</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Cited in Boym “Ilya Kabakov.”

moved to embrace the genre of the total installation, the painstaking creation of to-scale memory museums, which came to function as surrogates for his homeland.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, one can't help but see a similar attempt by Ugrešić to seek in literature a refuge from exile, to make the Republic of Letters her one true homeland.

In his multimedia project *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, Kabakov creates a "transmedial diary, a kind of total autobiography"<sup>69</sup> in which an anonymous Soviet citizen, the project's subject and object, mounts *disjecta membra* of the epoch onto large panels accompanied by dates and notes on where the mounted rubbish and discarded objects were found. In albums entitled *My Life* Kabakov's anonymous author again collects the junk of the everyday—holiday postcards, news clippings, photographs, letters, and other personal documents—in order to create an (auto)biography out of rubbish. As Ugrešić's narrator notes, "[b]y taking the mask of an ordinary Soviet citizen, and adopting his innocent technique of collecting everyday junk, Kabakov reveals the complex permeation of the system, politics, ideology, media, culture, education, the everyday and personal life."<sup>70</sup> While Ugrešić's narrator, an exile, a sophisticate, and *une triste*, is far from the average Yugoslav citizen, the extreme montage technique of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* nevertheless

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<sup>68</sup> The most well known of these is his *succès de scandale* reconstruction of Soviet toilets created in 1992 for the Documenta IX exhibition in Kassel. Kabakov discusses his inspiration for the installation in Boym's aforementioned article, with Boym outlining how the Russian press turned on Kabakov, accusing him of a "profanation of Russia," and their evocation of the Russian proverb "Do not take your trash out of your hut," meaning that one should not criticize one's own people in front of strangers and foreigners.

<sup>69</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 39. Croatian: "transmedijalni dnevnik, neka vrsta *totalne autobiografije*" (56).

<sup>70</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 40. Croatian: "Uzevši masku obična čovjeka, preuzevši njegove tehnike kolekcioniranja tričarija svakidašnjice, Kabakov otkriva složenu prožetost između sistema, ideologije, medija, kulture i osobnog života" (57).



appears to aim for the same.

Ugrešić's anxiety about the commodification and aestheticisation of communist everyday life is given full voice when her narrator, now in New York several years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, passes a small Kabakov painting in the window of an expensive gallery. She fears that its "painful beauty," created from discarded remnants of *Sovietana*, will simply not survive the long journey from Moscow to the Western art market. With Kabakov's art transformed into *Ostbloc chic*, the Western demand for artefacts from behind the fallen Iron Curtain appears as dreadful and ironic fulfilment of Kundera's prophecy that "the brotherhood of man on earth will only be possible on the basis of kitsch."<sup>71</sup> The implied question here is simply *what remains?* Are the little pieces of the Wall, hammers and sickles, and red stars hawked by Pakistanis ("the metaphorical heart of the end of an epoch"<sup>72</sup>) next to the Brandenburg Gate the only legacy of almost fifty years of a shared east European experience?

The ekphrasis in the Berlin sections of the novel also move well beyond the chronotope of post-Wall eastern Europe. The narrator poses the question of "Was ist Kunst?" (What is art?) to her diasporic community of artists, the most ambitious response being that "[a]rt is an endeavour to defend the wholeness of

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<sup>71</sup> Milan Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 248. According to Boym, during his first residence in the West, Kabakov was "overcome by a feeling of utter fear . . . when he realized that his work, taken out of the context, could become completely unreadable and meaningless, could disintegrate into chaos or dissolve in the sheer overabundance of art objects." Boym, *Nostalgia*, 312-13.

<sup>72</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 233. Croatian: "metaforičko . . . srce kraja epohe" (284).

the world, the secret connection between all things.”<sup>73</sup> However, the more specific question seems to concern art’s reconstructive properties and technologies of commemoration. Exploring the presence of absence, Ugrešić examines a number of projects related to the murdered Jews of Europe. In his installation *Projected Restoring*, Shimon Attie projects contemporary photographs of Berlin’s former Jewish quarter, the Scheunenviertel, onto a screen, superimposing projections of old photographs of the neighbourhood to create a holographic effect. In “The Square of the Invisible Monument” in Saarbrücken, over a three-year period Jochen Gerz and a group of his students secretly carve the names and numbers of Germany’s 2146 desecrated Jewish graveyards into the underside of stones from the town square and then carefully re-lay them. In Horst Hoheisel’s “Denk-Stein-Sammlung” project children write the biography of a murdered Jew and stick them onto pebbles, “memory stones” that are then put into toy trucks, miniatures of their once reified counterparts. And in his installation “The Missing House,” French artist Christian Boltanski honours the former Jewish occupants of a building destroyed during the Second World War, fixing plates with their names and occupations to the sides of the two buildings either side of where “The Missing House” once stood.

At a “Russians in Berlin” exhibition guests are greeted in the entrance by long strips of paper bearing the names of the streets the Russians are alleged to have destroyed as they took the city at the end of the Second World War. In the exhibition itself an invisible projector displays “before” and “after” slides—

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 169. Croatian: “Umjetnost je pokušaj da se brani cjelina svijeta, tajna povezanost između svih stvari” (211).

another example of Berlin, in Huyssen's phrase, as a city text and "urban palimpsest." Among other artists, we meet Sissel, who, obsessed with maps, sends a quotation from *Winnie the Pooh* to foreign embassies in Berlin requesting a translation. The original passage reads: "'There's the South Pole,' said Christopher Robin, 'and I expect there's an East Pole and a West Pole, though people don't like talking about them'"<sup>74</sup>—another of the novel's sly allusions to the enduring East-West divide. We meet artist Simone Mangos, who places a photograph of water from the River Spree in a glass case full of water; apparently it will last six months before the Spree's waters, Lethe-like, make the image disappear. Following so many ekphrastic fragments, when the narrator paraphrases Rilke's thought "that the story of a shattered life can only be told in bits and pieces,"<sup>75</sup> we simultaneously understand it as a meta-description of the novel itself.

The narrator also spends much time with the English artist Richard Wentworth, with whose fictionalization Ugrešić plays a metafictional game, suggesting in a footnote that "[a]ny similarity between Richard and himself is intended and accidental."<sup>76</sup> Richard, a ragpicker in the streets and flea markets of Berlin, confesses to his "love affair" with the city, which he affectionately calls "the world capital of rubbish."<sup>77</sup> His studio is a warehouse of collected "treasure," loaded with scavenged bric-a-brac, plates, chairs, lightbulbs, soup cans, from

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 105. In the original Croatian novel the passage is cited in English.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 114. Croatian: "priča o uzdrmanu života može biti ispričana samo u djelićima i fragmentima" (139).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 167. Croatian: "Svaka sličnost sa samim sobom namjerna je, ali i slučajna" (208).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 174. Croatian: "Berlin je svjetska prijestolnica smeća" (216).

which the most emblematic pieces will in time be curated into exhibitions.<sup>78</sup> With a surrealist sensibility Richard marries a builder's spade and a soft pillow covered in a pillowcase of fine linen, a rough metal mesh and a soft Persian rug, a cold tin and warm silk. Here it is apposite to recall Sontag's assertion that

[t]he genius of Surrealism was to generalize with ebullient candour the baroque cult of ruins; to perceive that the nihilistic energies of the modern era make everything a ruin or fragment—and therefore collectible. A world whose past has become (by definition) obsolete, and whose present churns out instant antiques, invites, custodians, decoders, and collectors.<sup>79</sup>

In the same essay on Benjamin, Sontag writes of his "Saturnine temperament" and interest in the melancholic, how Benjamin suggests "faithlessness" as a "trait of the predominance of Saturn," a trait embodied by baroque drama's manipulative courtier whose faithlessness to his fellow men is inextricably linked with the "deeper, more contemplative faith" he maintains with material things.<sup>80</sup> As Sontag has it, Benjamin perceives that "the deep transactions between the melancholic and the world always take place with things (rather than with people) and that these are genuine transactions, which reveal

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<sup>78</sup> In a recent article Stijn Vervaet contends that Ugrešić's fascination with flea markets and artists such as Kabakov, Boltanski, and Wentworth suggests that she is at work on "creatively reinscribing the figures of the museum and the archive . . . provocatively reminding us of their others in times of enforced collective amnesia" (296), and implies that both Ugrešić's narrator and the aforementioned artists are saving scraps of the everyday from oblivion. While this may be true with regard to the Yugoslav everyday (for which there are no museums), as indicated by Huyssen above, the junk of the everyday has been successfully musealised for a good two or three decades. (Likewise, surrealism, to which all three artists owe a significant debt, was swallowed by the museum long ago.) In fact, Kabakov and Boltanski are two of the contemporary art world's greatest stars. In this regard Vervaet's general contention that "drawing attention to the excluded, marginalized or suppressed art that incorporates rubbish shows us the other face of the subject" (301), appears an unfortunate reiteration (in an otherwise erudite article) of a long outmoded avant-gardist museum critique. See Stijn Vervaet, "Remembering in the Work of Dubravka Ugrešić," *Comparative Critical Studies* 8, no. 2-3 (2011): 295-306.

<sup>79</sup> Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 120.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

meaning.”<sup>81</sup> She goes on to suggest that “[i]f this melancholy temperament is faithless to people, it has good reason to be faithful to things. Fidelity lies in accumulating things—which appear, mostly, in the form of fragments or ruins.”<sup>82</sup>

Like Benjamin’s melancholic (and Benjamin the melancholic), Richard’s fidelity lies in the accumulation of things such as his collection of odd plates, which he believes he is saving from ruin. Washing and caressing them, contemplating the dishes they must have served, he suggests that “[i]t’s like washing your own body . . . You discover moles, little scars and marks on your skin which you had not noticed before.” This prompts the narrator’s tellingly *melancholic* and *faithless* response that, “[i]t’s as though there’s no difference between things and people.”<sup>83</sup>

### 3.4 Family Museums

People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It’s not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories re-written.<sup>84</sup>

The Kundera citation above encapsulates the central concerns of Part Two of the novel, “Family Museum,” and its meditations on photography and autobiography.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 171. Croatian: “Kao da pereš vlastito tijelo. Pranje je neka vrsta intimne inspekcije. Otkrivaš madeže, male ožiljke i mrlje na koži, koje dotada nisi zamjetio.” “Između stvari i ljudi kao da nema velike razlike” (213).

<sup>84</sup> Kundera, *Laughter and Forgetting*, 22. Ugrešić uses this citation to introduce the title essay of *The Culture of Lies*.

Sinking into what Benjamin called “the mysterious work of remembrance,”<sup>85</sup> the narrator chronicles her mother’s struggle to assemble and edit their family photo albums into an acceptable narrative of her life. For Benjamin, those wanting to understand the buried past need to work like “a man digging . . . to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil.”<sup>86</sup> Only in this process of excavation and recovery, in the probing of dark loam, will the metaphorical earth give up its “real treasure,” the dissociated images to be examined “in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding.”<sup>87</sup>

The metaphorical soil through which the narrator begins her initial excavation is buried in the pigskin bag (the first of the novel’s mini-museums) that her mother brought from Bulgaria to Croatia as a bride-to-be immediately after the Second World War. When a picture of the narrator’s deceased father slides from the wardrobe in which the bag is kept, her mother, following years of splenetic threats to throw them out, finally attempts to arrange a lifetime of images into albums—an act of self-musealisation. Proving herself a merciless censor, the narrator’s mother removes pictures of those who have fallen from favour, while constantly curating highly selective “exhibitions” of her own images in an effort to destroy “the link between photography and death [that] haunts all photographs of people.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Walter Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle,” in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979), 293-316 (305).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 70.

From the photographic archive, we move to the personal diary, another form of self-musealisation. Following her daughter's instructions to write about her everyday life, the mother fills the diary with what she knows are banalities: worries of being forgotten by her children, fears of illness, coffee and idle gossip with neighbours ("tea for opening and closing the bowel"<sup>89</sup>), concerns about household bills and the deteriorating political situation, letters from extended family, childhood memories, and reports on the weather. As the entries conclude, the narrator makes the extra-diegetic admission that she has actually rewritten and reshaped the jottings we have just read. Having corrected spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other errors of style, in the wake of this cleansing she wonders if she has actually wiped her mother away.

Finally hitting upon ideas about the link between photo albums and autobiography, the narrator sees the photo album as "material autobiography" and autobiography as "a verbal album."<sup>90</sup> Their nostalgic and amateur curatorial impulses allow them to unexpectedly strike "the point of indistinct pain,"<sup>91</sup> which Barthes in *Camera Lucida*—a book that was essentially a search for his mother—refers to as the photograph's *punctum*, "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."<sup>92</sup> In a twist on Sontag's dialectic, which holds that the photograph's very eagerness to preserve life inexorably signals the reverse, the narrator maintains that "the very act of arranging pictures in an album is dictated by our unconscious desire to show life in all its variety, and as a

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<sup>89</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 45. Croatian: "čajevi[...] za otvaranje i zatvaranje" (63).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 30. Croatian: "materijalna autobiografija"; "verbalni album" (45).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* Croatian: "sadržana je u nekoj nejasnoj točki isto tako nejasne boli" (45).

<sup>92</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 26-7.

consequence life is reduced to a series of dead fragments.”<sup>93</sup> Autobiography has similar inherent flaws in that “it is concerned with what once was, and the trouble is that what was once is being recorded by someone who is now.”<sup>94</sup> The fierce genre conventions—genre being one of Ugrešić’s recurrent metafictional concerns in the novel—of both photo albums and autobiography are “guided by the hand of the invisible angel of nostalgia,” which “[w]ith its heavy, mournful wing . . . brushes aside the demons of irony.”<sup>95</sup>

In her penultimate diary entry the narrator’s mother confesses her envy for those whose lives “resemble a well-thought out story,” an idea immediately paired with a citation from Isaac Babel in which he maintains that “[t]here is no reason why a well-thought out story should resemble real-life, life strives with all its might to resemble a well-thought-out story.”<sup>96</sup> Here Ugrešić revives her long interest in reverse mimesis and the intersection of fact and fiction, a theme she later takes up intratextually in the mini-story “A Night in Lisbon,” itself a rewriting of Babel’s “My First Fee.” Suggesting life’s potent ability to imitate art, in a postscript to the diary excerpts, the narrator describes spending September of 1991 between a blacked-out flat and an air raid shelter, her mother’s diarized fears having become a reality. In 1946 her mother travelled from Bulgaria to Croatia through a landscape ravaged by war, and now her greatest childhood

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<sup>93</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 31. Croatian: “sam čin slaganja fotografija u albume upravlja naša nesvjesna želja da se pokaže život u svoj njegovoj raznolikosti, a život je u rezultatu (u albumu, dakle) sveden na niz mrtvih fragmenata” (46).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. Croatian: “ona se bavi onim što je jednom bilo, a to što je jednom bilo ispisuje netko koji sada jest” (46).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. Croatian: “Album i autobiografija djelatnosti su vođene rukom nevidljivog anđela nostalgije. Svojim teškim, sjetnim krilom anđeo nostalgije otpuhuje đavole ironije u stranu” (47).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 58. Croatian: “Dobro izmišljena priča nema razloga da liči na stvarni život, život se iz petnih žila trudi da liči na dobro izmišljenu priču” (78).



fear—of a glove turned inside out—has come true.<sup>97</sup> Having missed the second Yugoslavia’s bloody birth in the Second World War at the start of her life, at its end she finally witnesses what she missed at the beginning. The ability of the past to prophesy the future is, however, nowhere better symbolised than by the rose an old man cuts from an apple peel and gives her mother on that distant train journey, the apple peel containing “her whole life, all its details, perhaps even a little hint of the surgeon’s cut of her breast that she was to have a full 43 years later.”<sup>98</sup>

Mixing analepses and prolepses, mimesis (imagined representations of this past) and diegesis (the retelling of anecdotes and events originally told to her by her mother), the narrator, in search of her mother, heaps Benjaminian fragment upon fragment: vignettes about post-war recipes, consumer goods, movies from fraternal states, life in a workers’ colony, showers in the factory baths, a visit by Tito, and pressing one’s child body into crusty grey snow—“making angels.” These trips into the capriciousness of “inner memory” function as Proustian madeleines—triggers for other memories and associations. With the narrator’s description of a glass ball containing a replica town under a dark sky, which when turned upside down sees snow fall on the town, Ugrešić introduces

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<sup>97</sup> Throughout the novel Ugrešić mines the recurrent idea that the past is prophetic of the future, intertwining ideas about oniromants, interpreters of dreams, and the border between dreamed and real worlds. The narrator meets a certain Telemachus who, recalling a youth spent chopping wood, crosses two axes in a dream. When the Berlin Wall falls the very next day he feels himself responsible, not only for the fall of the Wall, but also for the inextricably linked outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia. In another story a Belgrade psychologist leaves Belgrade following the outbreak of war and ends up working in a psychiatric clinic in Maine. Years later she consults the diary in which she had recorded her dreams in the years before the war. Horrified, she realises that she had dreamed the impending horrors for years, which leads the narrator to question cause and effect.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 96. Croatian: “leži sav njezin život, svi detalji, možda čak i mali nagovještaj kirurškog reza dojke koji će joj načiniti punih četrdeset i tri godine kasnije” (118).

another of the novel's recurring leitmotifs and a further perchance or perforce reference to Benjamin.<sup>99</sup>

If we are all curators of our own museums, retouchers of our own biographies, censors and manipulators of our family albums, Ugrešić suggests to us that the histories of nations and states can also be rearranged or made to disappear. The “autobiographies” of nations and states are every bit as fragile as those of individuals, subject to retouching, voluntary or forced amnesia, and the spirited manufacturing of new imagologies. In 1991, the independence of Croatia from the federal state of Yugoslavia ushered in a decade of triumphant Croatian nationalism, bringing on what Ugrešić termed “the confiscation of memory.” It was a time

[w]hen the names of the streets changed, when the language and the country and the flags and the symbols all changed; when the wrong side became right, and the right side was suddenly wrong; when some people were afraid of their own names, when others, apparently, for the first time weren't afraid of theirs; when people were butchering each other, when some were butchering others; when armies with different insignia sprang up on all sides, when the strongest set out to obliterate everything from the face of their own country; when terrible heatwaves laid the land bare; when a lie became the law, and the law a lie; when people pronounced nothing but monosyllabic words: blood, war, gun, fear . . . when old myths fell apart and new ones were feverishly created.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> According to Sontag, Benjamin loved “such playful miniaturizations of reality as the winter world inside a glass globe that snows when it is shaken” (“Sign of Saturn,” 123).

<sup>100</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 25. Croatian: Kada su se promijenili nazivi ulica, kada se promijenio jezik i zemlja i zastave i simboli: kada su se promijenili nazivi ustanova, škola, vlakova i aviona: kada je kriva strana postala prava, a prava naglo kriva: kada su se jedni pobojali vlastitih imena, kada su ih drugi prvi put nisu bojali; kada su kasapili jedni druge, kada su jedni kasapili druge; kada su prokuljala najjača da sve vatre s lice svoje zemlje; kada su zemlju pustošile strašne vrućine; kada je laž postala zakon a zakon laž; kada su novine o istom pisali različito, kada su ljudi govorili različito, kada su iz usta izlazile samo jednosložne riječi: krv, rat, nož, strah; kada su male balkanske zemlje tresle Evropu s pravom tvrdeći da su njezina zakonita djeca; kada su odnekud izmiljeli mravi da pojedu i odvuku kožuricu i posljednjeg potomka prokletih plemena; kada su se raspadali stari mitovi i u vrućici stvarali novi” (38-39).

Here it is again apposite to recall Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in which the narrator cites a conversation with the (real) dissident Milan Hubl, with Hubl stating:

The first step in liquidating a people . . . is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.<sup>101</sup>

Kundera's narrator notes that all the monuments to Tomáš Masaryk ("the liberator-president") were destroyed by Gustáv Husák, "the president of forgetting," who is said to have dismissed 145 Czech historians from their posts. In Ugrešić's post-Yugoslav writings, Franjo Tuđman, the first post-independence Croatian president—ironically, a historian by profession—plays this same role.

### 3.5 Angels and Psychograms

As noted by one Croatian reviewer, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender's* final even-numbered chapter, "Group Photograph," provoked a measure of excitement—and perhaps trepidation—in local literary circles, with many curious to see who Ugrešić had described in "psychograms" similar to those in Miłosz's *The Captive Mind*.<sup>102</sup> In almost all respects, however, this is perhaps the least interesting approach to a chapter that weaves together so many of the novel's "threads"—photography, memory, mimesis, intertextuality, ruins, and

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<sup>101</sup> Kundera, *Laughter and Forgetting*, 159.

<sup>102</sup> See Jagna Pogačnik, "Strah od zaborava," review of *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Jutarnji list*, n.d. Collected in *Proza poslije FAK-a* (Zagreb: Profil International, 2006): 337-41.

the interpolation of the past in the present. The chapter begins with a citation from Isaac Babel's "The Sin of Jesus" in which God agrees to send a young angel named Alfred to earth to be the husband and protector of the abused and pregnant Arina.<sup>103</sup> In Ugrešić's novel, on the eve of the Yugoslav wars, a magical realist angel named Alfred interrupts one of the regular "culinary orgies" attended by the narrator and a group of her female university colleagues. Significantly, literature for the women is not merely an institution, but an escape from the petty hatreds and regular defeats of their milieu, a love that allows them to walk "ten centimetres above the ground"—ground that will soon be pulled out from under them.<sup>104</sup> Politics, in contrast, is "an unexciting activity . . . a profession for fools and . . . men."<sup>105</sup>

Alfred appears as a strange embodiment of Benjamin's exalted Angel of History. Wearing a T-shirt bearing the Yugoslav coat-of-arms, a badge of Tito pinned on it, and accessorized with a Yugoslav flag and a hammer and sickle, he joins the women in their customary throwing of tarot cards. Yet instead of clues to their future professional, love, and family lives, he brings forth a raucous sound collage, a mish-mash of quotes—"wreckage" from literary classics and Koranic, Talmudic, Biblical (significantly, the Book of Revelations), Buddhist, Taoist, and Tibetan teachings, as well as excerpts from socialist readers and rap lyrics—a harbinger of the inchoate sound and fury to come. In an attempt to create an *aide*

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<sup>103</sup> Isaac Babel, "The Sin of Jesus," in *The Collected Stories*, ed. and trans. Walter Morrison (London: Methuen, 1957), 245-250.

<sup>104</sup> Here again there is an echo of Kundera: "In the political jargon of the day 'intellectual' was an expletive. It designated a person who failed to understand life and was cut off from the people. All Communists hanged at the time by other Communists had that curse bestowed upon them. Unlike people with their feet planted firmly on the ground, they supposedly floated in air. In a sense, then, it was only fair they have the ground pulled out from under them once and for all and be left there hanging slightly above it." (*Laughter and Forgetting*, 5).

<sup>105</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 185.

*mémoire*, to colour the blank photograph of her university colleagues she may or may not have taken on the night of Alfred's appearance, the narrator sketches short portraits of those in attendance.

Including the narrator herself, each of the eight women present is introduced by a representative tarot card. Six of the eight cards are "minor arcana," suite cards, which reveal only lesser secrets, yet the narrator and Ivana, to whom she feels closest, are represented by "major arcana," trump cards, said to reveal greater secrets. We first meet the dark-eyed "Nusa," who with the outbreak of war declares that "every family should give one member for the defence of the homeland"<sup>106</sup>—her 18-year-old son is among the first to be mobilised. We meet Alma, who, with a sixth-sense for where things are heading, declares that her deceased father, a former partisan general, had in fact been a *murderer*, yet fiercely defends her right to his downtown apartment. We meet Nina, who teaches Russian literature in a small Adriatic town recognisable as Zadar, some of whose students take to the hills and fire back down on her; Nina takes to drinking. And we meet Dinka, who, like Alma and Nusa, takes refuge in literature, trying to block out the betrayals, large and small, occurring around her.

The portrait of Hana in wartorn Sarajevo is particularly moving. Her apparent reluctance to name the aggressor leads to rumours that she had been a young communist, and then, contrarily, to new ones suggesting that she is an Islamic fundamentalist. In a heartbreaking letter to the narrator Hana describes

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 206. Croatian: "Držim da je svaka obitelj trebala dati jednog člana za obranu domovine" (253).

Sarajevo, once famed as a meeting place of different cultures, as being “on the border between a complete absence of civilisation and its greatest achievements.”<sup>107</sup> Yet when she finally makes it out of Sarajevo to Zagreb, not one of the “university girls” is able to put her up. From her exile abroad the narrator writes of their betrayal of Hana:

What was happening during those months was a terrible betrayal of everything, everyone . . . And it was easy and painless to hide behind that general betrayal and use that to justify one’s personal, unimportant one. While some destroyed the house, others massacred the people who lived there, others again dragged out the furniture, others took everything else, yet others looked on with interest, others with disgust, others closed their eyes, others weren’t there to see . . . That was how things went.<sup>108</sup>

The lengthiest portrait is of the crucifix-wearing Doti,<sup>109</sup> who interrupts Alfred’s jumbled recitation of Jovan Jovanović Zmaj’s “The Cherry-Picker,” offended that in Zagreb he is only able to remember a Serbian poem. We learn that Doti’s father was an Ustasha pitchforked by locals after the Second World War, having fought on the wrong side. She in turn marries a man who “signed something which he shouldn’t have in those days, or said something out loud which he

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 213. Croatian: “na granici između potpunog odsustva civilizacije i njezinih najviših dometa” (261).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 214. Croatian: “Na djelu je tih mjeseci posvuda bila strašna izdaja, svega, svakoga i svačega. I bilo je lako i bezbolno sakriti se iza opće izdaje i njome opravdati svoju pojedinačnu i tako nevažnu. Jer jedni su srušili kuću, drugi izmasakrirali ukućane, treći razvukli namještaj, četvrti preostale stvari, peti su gledali sa zanimanjem, šesti s gađenjem, sedmi su zatvarali oči, osmih nije bilo da to vide. Takav je bio slijed stvari” (263).

<sup>109</sup> While those interested in playing literary police could easily identify at least a handful of the real people to whom Ugrešić gives aliases in this section, even a casual follower of Ugrešić’s work and personal trajectory will identify “Doti” as bearing a striking resemblance to Dubravka Oraić-Tolić, with whom Ugrešić long shared an office at the University of Zagreb. Oraić-Tolić is mentioned by Žmegač in his letter to *Literatur und Kritik*, and it is her with whom Ugrešić polemicalizes in the essay “The Palindrome Story” from *The Culture of Lies*. For a critical overview of the polemic see Celia Hawkesworth, “The Palindrome Scandal and the Yugoslav War,” in *The Literature of Nationalism: Essays on East European Identity*, ed. Robert B. Pynsent (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 219-235.

shouldn't have,"<sup>110</sup> an uncanny echo of a similar admission by the narrator. In the narrator's imagination, Doti spent many of the Yugoslav years thinking of herself as a kind of Croatian Ulrike Meinhof. The romance of Doti's exilic rebellion ends when she returns to Zagreb to receive a literary prize and her passport, along with her husband's, is confiscated; yet the aura of martyrdom fades quickly. Doti gets a university job and her husband works as a schoolteacher, proof enough for her of communist oppression. In the new time, Doti's victorious political party gifts her and her husband a revolver, two grenades, and a long-term loan of thirty thousand German marks, with which the necrophiliac Doti intends to buy a "decent family tomb."<sup>111</sup>

With the outbreak of war, Doti apparently begins compiling secret lists of faculty employees, "putting little plus or minus signs beside their names."<sup>112</sup> The narrator imagines that "a plus mean[s] Croat and loyal, minus *non-Croat* and *disloyal*, and two minuses *Serb* and *fifth-columnist*"<sup>113</sup> and that Doti does so "in defence of the thousand-year dream of all the Croats, in defence of an independent Croatia, in the name of an idea for which she had secretly prepared and suffered all her life."<sup>114</sup> The narrator later learns that she herself had scored at least one minus, perhaps two, in Doti's secret accounts. On a visit to Zagreb the narrator contrasts her "dirty" knowledge of forced evictions, police terror, mass sackings, war profiteering, of houses and villages in flames, and the war's

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<sup>110</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 216. Croatian: "će potpisati nešto što se tada nije smjelo ili glasno reći nešto što se nije smjelo" (265).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 219. Croatian: "pristojnu obiteljsku grobnicu" (269).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 220. Croatian: "stavljajući ispred imena male markacijske pluseve i minuseve" (269).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* Croatian: "plus značio Hrvat i lojalan, minus ne-Hrvat i nelojalan, a dva minusa Srbin i petokolonaš" (269).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* Croatian: "u obranu tisućljetnog sna svih Hrvata, u obranu nezavisne Hrvatske, u ime ideje za koju se tajno pripremala i stradala cijelog života" (269).

“collateral suicides” with a television interview in which Doti proudly declares “I am glad that our victory was clean.”<sup>115</sup> In exile the narrator reads a newspaper cutting featuring Doti’s demands for “a restoration of moral principles into the nation’s life and culture,” and declaration of “a new, moral postmodernity.”<sup>116</sup> The narrator’s name is printed in bold in the article’s title, a poster girl for postmodern amorality.

The penultimate portrait is of Ivana, who is most distraught when Doti ends Alfred’s “jumbled rosary of words,”<sup>117</sup> convinced that he has been trying to tell them something—an angel being an intercessor between God and man. (Here it is apposite to remember that in Babel’s story, Arina, drunk on vodka, crushes Alfred’s wings and kills him.) Before his departure, Alfred places his hands on Ivana’s cheeks and presses his forehead against hers. This angelic stamp signifies not Immaculate Conception, but a blessing through which, following a series of miscarriages, she will nine months later carry a baby boy to term. Born at a time of destruction, and with his mother tongue violently split into three, the narrator’s descriptions of the boy speaking in his own way—speaking with the angel—and his experiencing of himself in the third person, suggest that the child is autistic. Although Ivana doesn’t remember Alfred’s stamp on her forehead, her boy repeats the gesture.

Finally, represented by the trump card of “The Fool,” the narrator concludes the section with an extradiegetic overview of the angel motif as it runs through the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “*Radujem se, jer je naša pobjeda bila čista*” (269).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 222. Croatian: “povratak moralnih načela u domovinski život i kulturu”; “*novu, moralnu postmodernu*” (271).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 194. Croatian: “u toj smušenoj brojanici riječi” (240).



group photograph, and the novel as a whole. As the only one who misses out on one of the “feathers of oblivion” Alfred gifts to her friends, the narrator, much to her disappointment, is left with the apparently dubious gift of “tattered remembrance.” As she insists, the job of literature is not the recording, but “the invention of reality.”<sup>118</sup> Conceding the metafictional game, she explains that

(a)ngels were invented by grown-up people, to make life more bearable. Writers are grown-up people, who like inventing things. That’s why I gave them an angel. A little something to make life more bearable . . . And I know it has turned out feeble, but . . . an angel’s only as good as his writer.<sup>119</sup>

Although angels appear throughout the novel as bearers of comfort, like Alfred, their work is inevitably associated with forgetting rather than remembering. In American exile, the narrator remembers the parish church of Maria of the Snows in the Croatian village of Belac, where the hundred carved wooden angels in the chipped Baroque altar are under constant attack from fugitive woodworms. And when her Indian roommate Uma plucks a feather from her genitals and gives it to the narrator, it places her at the mercy of “the dark angels of oblivion.”<sup>120</sup> Here, as in so many other sections of the novel, Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* functions as a perforce or perchance intertext. Hana Pichova reminds

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 225. Croatian: “izmišljanje stvarnosti” (275).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 226. Croatian: “Anđela su izmislili odrasli ljudi, kao trik koji će život učiniti snošljivijim. I pisci su odrasli ljudi, rado izmišljaju stvari. Zato sam im, curama, namjestila anđela. Mali trik koji će život učiniti snošljivijem. I znam da je ispalo ubogo, ali kakav pisac takav anđeo” (276). In a number of the novel’s vignettes, the narratorial claim that she has invented angels “to make life more bearable” appears to hold true. When she sends her imaginary whispers to Christa, “*Gute Nacht, Christa . . . Schlaf mit den Engelchen ein*” (Good night, Christa, sleep with the little angel) it is to comfort her. When she imagines passing her tongue over the two small mother-of-pearl scars on Antonio’s shoulder blades, it is a mark of compassion for Antonio having “fallen from grace” (to earth) and lost his wings. After the death of the grandmother the narrator never liked as a child, the narrator re-imagines her as an angel who, when she shakes her curls, sends hoar frost falling from the sky, the thought allowing the narrator the comfort of self-forgiveness.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 131. Croatian: “tamni anđeli zaborava” (160).

us that Kundera's angelic intercessor, Raphael, "promotes the dangerous laughter of forgetting, which ends in death,"<sup>121</sup> a recognition that comes too late for Kundera's protagonist Tamina who accompanies the angel into an underworld inhabited exclusively by children; people without pasts and without memory. In their respective political circumstances, for both Kundera and Ugrešić the erasure or confiscation of memory, a mass state of amnesia, is a precondition for totalitarian authorities to retrospectively make the wrong side the right side. In this interpretation, the narrator's university friends, whose memories are wiped clean by Alfred's feathers and departing flash of light (the same flash that blanks the group photograph), are those now able to be "retooled as children." As the narrator maintains—like the grass and asphalt-covered ruins of Berlin, and like the ivy-covered graves in the Jewish cemetery in Schönhauser Allee—the Balkan minefields will be soon covered in grass. And in time grass will also cover all those who remember the nightmare. While this may be understood as the ineluctable triumph of forgetting over remembering, the novel constantly reminds us that the ruins and remnants of what once was, even when no longer visible, lie in wait to pierce the skin, find the *punctum*, of the unsuspecting.

### **3.6 *Homo Poeticus* and *Homo Politicus***

With the Yugoslav wars reviving the ghosts of European fascism, the new Croatian state having excavated and rehabilitated iconographic and ideological exhibits from the basement of its Nazi past, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is a novel that slips beyond the physical referent of its title. When

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<sup>121</sup> Kundera, *Laughter and Forgetting*, 52.

Franjo Tuđman's nationalists won the country's first multi-party elections in 1990, party academic Dalibor Brozović famously sent out a call for the *bezuvjetna kapitulacija*—the “unconditional capitulation”—of the Croatian left.<sup>122</sup> In this sense, while a novel entitled *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* may feign resigned accession to Brozović's demand—the surrender of the Yugoslav past—the novel's very materiality confirms it as a record of defiance.

With its extreme narrative fragmentation and its collage of intertextual references, essayist digressions, diarist and memoirist impulses, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* resolutely defies the nationalist call for the end of postmodernism in Croatian literature.<sup>123</sup> As a literary response to the violent end of Yugoslavia, its radical formalism likewise frustrates the international literary marketplace's demand for straightforward fables of good and evil and literary tourist guides to the war and its consequences. Yet as Monica Popescu notes, the “postmodern” label that is so tempting to apply to the novel “fails to capture the ethically engaged nature of the work.”<sup>124</sup> *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* can in this sense be read as Ugrešić's personal attempt to reconcile what her countryman Danilo Kiš called the “eternal opposition between *Homo poeticus*

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<sup>122</sup> See Boris Mikulić, “Zastave ili beskonačni manjak ideološke utjehe. Povratak kritičkog diskursa iz estetičke analize kiča,” <http://mudrac.ffzg.hr/~bmikulic/Homepage/ugresic.htm> [accessed 24 July 2011].

<sup>123</sup> For more on this see David Williams, “Literary Aesthetics and Ethical Engagement: the End of Yugoslavia and the Fiction of Dubravka Ugrešić,” in *Literature and Politics: Pushing the World in Certain Directions*, ed. Peter Marks (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming 2012), 143-54.

<sup>124</sup> Popescu, “Imagining the Past,” 337.

and *Homo politicus*,” a novel that seeks to resolve “this problem of the political versus the metaphysical, the political versus the lyrical.”<sup>125</sup>

While it bears underlining that much of Ugrešić’s fiction may owe a theoretical or conceptual debt to Borges, in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Ugrešić, unlike the Argentine, who justified his silence on the Disappeared with the infamous claim “*No leo los diarios*” (I don’t read newspapers),<sup>126</sup> never ignores the horrendous events in her former homeland. But literary ethics are never sacrificed for political ones. Any reconciliation between the writer as *homo politicus* and *homo poeticus* can never be at the expense of surrendering the autonomy of literature. Writing in the shadow of mass human displacement and murder is a moral issue for Ugrešić, but it never stops being a literary one.

### 3.7 Reception

Like that of Kundera and a number of other east European émigré writers, Ugrešić’s success abroad has often been a source of considerable suspicion in her homeland (in this case, Croatia), where she has (implicitly and explicitly) been accused of performing a kind of *Auftragskunst*—of willingly meeting the demands of the western literary marketplace for “the fairy tale about good and evil, which a good child likes to hear again and again.”<sup>127</sup> The accusation is doubly chauvinistic, implying both that Ugrešić’s talent has played no part in her success, and that western readers are too stupid to see that they have had the wool pulled over their eyes. It would, however, be disingenuous to suggest that

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<sup>125</sup> Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 260-1.

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in James, *Cultural Amnesia*, 70.

<sup>127</sup> Roth, *Shop Talk*, 56. Here the “good child” is a synonym for a liberal western audience.

extraliterary factors have played no part in the attention Ugrešić has received—when Anna Akhmatova learned of Brodsky’s exile even she is alleged to have responded to the effect of “oh what a biography they have written for our little redhead.”

Examining a selection of Croatian, Francophone, Germanophone, and Anglophone reviews of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* I hope to shed some light on two related problems: the milieu that disdains the success of its prophets in others’ backyards, and the geopolitical circumscription placed on exiled prophets by foreign backyards. My aim is to provide an empirically grounded response to Jančar’s assertion that “the literature of the ‘east European ruins’” has not stood a chance at home or abroad. Rather than attempting to provide a summary of each and every review, my purpose is rather to bring to light aspects of certain reviews which illuminate the problems above, or otherwise contain particular insight into the novel, or in some way converge with my own reading.

When considering the Croatian reception of all three of Ugrešić’s post-Yugoslav novels, it is worthwhile noting that in Germany alone Günter Grass’s first two post-reunification novels, *Unkenrufe* (1992, *The Call of the Toad*) and *Ein weites Feld* (1995, *Too Far Afield*), were the subject of at least 91 and 161 reviews respectively.<sup>128</sup> Armed with a corpus of this size, reception scholars have, with relative ease, been able to establish readership communities, whether

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<sup>128</sup> See Siegfried Mews, *Günter Grass and His Critics: The Tin Drum to Crabwalk* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008), 251; 267.

geographically, politically, or aesthetically-based. The specific difficulty vis-à-vis *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (one that also applies to *The Ministry of Pain* and *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*) is that there appears to have only been *four* reviews published in Croatia.<sup>129</sup> In a country of just over four million people this need not mean that the book was deliberately *totgeschwiegen*—killed by not being mentioned—although neither can this be completely dismissed as a possibility. (Given that the novel was Ugrešić’s first to be published in Croatia for fourteen years, and that it appeared as part of a collection of all her previous serious literary work, certainly makes it surprising that both the novel and the publishing project as a whole were met with relative silence.) With respect to the skeletal size of the Croatian review corpus, offering empirically grounded conclusions is, for obvious reasons, not without its challenges.

Firstly, although it *appears* to have only been reviewed four times upon publication, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* was nonetheless shortlisted for Croatia’s perhaps most well-known literary prize (awarded by the *Jutarnji list* daily), and has since ranked consistently well in various national “best of” lists. Interestingly, the only negative review was by Daša Drndić, a well-respected writer of Ugrešić’s generation who began writing more intensively after the

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<sup>129</sup> It bears underlining that locating reviews of a book published in Croatia a decade ago is not a straightforward undertaking. Digitalization and archivization in the Croatian context are simply not on a par with the Anglophone, Francophone or Germanophone spheres. Reviews mentioned here and collected in the bibliography have been located through online and library searches, and particularly with regard to the Francophone and Germanophone reviews, I was fortunate to have access to publishers’ review collections from the personal archive of Dubravka Ugrešić. In undertaking a brief reception study of this nature it is virtually impossible to capture every review ever published. Furthermore, there is little way of knowing the exact number of reviews ever published, and therefore how many or few one may have missed. I do, however, believe that (with the possible exception of the Croatian reception of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*) the review sample is large enough to illustrate certain tendencies with a good degree of reliability.

disintegration of Yugoslavia and her move from Belgrade to Rijeka. Drndić's main objections to the novel were that the themes of photography ("perhaps a little old hat in literature")<sup>130</sup> and exile feature strongly, while the exiled first-person narrator (who Drndić repeatedly flirts with directly identifying as Ugrešić herself) is characterised as an "unbalanced, angry, confused, and spoilt woman in the role of intelligent and sensitive adolescent."<sup>131</sup> In fact, Drndić asserts that the novel's autobiographical elements are "marginal," "irrelevant," and "questionable,"<sup>132</sup> yet simultaneously leaves us in no doubt that an autobiographical reading is most appropriate for "unlocking" the novel. We are likewise advised that the narrator is over-emotional, self-pitying, and pathetic, someone who "perhaps too often declaratively mentions her pain," and "hides behind infantilism and unargued sentimentality."<sup>133</sup> Interestingly, in 1997 Drndić herself published a semi-autobiographical novel about her own brief exile in Toronto (*Marija Częstohowska još uvijek roni suze ili Umiranje u Torontu*; *Maria Częstohowska still shedding tears or Dying in Toronto*), which in its fragmented and collage-like structure bears a certain resemblance to *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Furthermore, photographs and photography are central themes in Drndić's oeuvre, a 2003 novel even bearing the title *Leica format*. In short, we appear to have entered the "backstabbing" territory mentioned by Renato Baretić in the previous chapter.

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<sup>130</sup> Daša Drndić, review of *Muzej beuvjetne predaje, Slobodna Dalmacija*, 21 May 2003. Collected in Drndić's *After Eight: Književni ogledi* (Zagreb: Meandar, 2005), 161–67 (167). Croatian: "možda u književnosti pomalo potrošene" (163).

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "zatečenu, ljutitu, zbunjenu i razmaženu ženu u ulozi pametne senzibilne adolescentice" (167).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "sporedni"; "nebitni"; "upitni" (161).

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "možda prečesto deklarativno spominje svoju bol"; "krije se iza infantilnosti i neargumentirane sentimentalnosti" (166).

Reviewing the novel more positively, Jagna Pogačnik begins by noting the early rumours that *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* contained elements of a *roman-à-clef*, and concedes that in 1998 this was reason enough for her to browse the novel's German edition in a Zagreb bookstore (though she concludes the rumours were wrong). Unfortunately, with this opening making a "mockery of the narcissistic illusion that one's love for *belles lettres* is exalted or noble" (c.f. Jovanović) the review doesn't really improve. Pogačnik insists that although Ugrešić may be a "shunned" writer in Croatia, people still read her, and that as a melancholic novel about exile, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* will "with absolute certainty"<sup>134</sup> appeal to a foreign reader, even though it doesn't at all conform to such a reader's "perception." The exact nature of this alleged perception is never made clear. The review concludes with the suggestion the Ugrešić is "more emotional than we would expect from her."<sup>135</sup>

More interesting is the review by Zdravko Zima, in which he observes that "even with the best of intentions some facts that have no direct connection to literature are difficult to avoid,"<sup>136</sup> and that Ugrešić's fate serves as a kind of litmus test offering a different diagnosis on Croatia's health to that promoted by the nationalists. Continuing in this vein, Zima writes:

If writers whom no one in the rest of world has ever heard of are applauded in Croatia, while writers who are translated and published abroad are shunned, then this can't simply be attributed to the rotten

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<sup>134</sup> Pogačnik, "Strah od zaborava," 340. Croatian: "posve sigurno."

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "više emotivna nego što bismo to od nje očekivali" (341).

<sup>136</sup> Zdravko Zima, "Rekvijem za jednu epohu" (review of *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* by Dubravka Ugrešić), *Lovac u labrintu: eseji i elzeveri* (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2006): 252-56.

Ibid. Croatian: "neke činjenice, koje nemaju izravne veze s književnošću, i uz najbolju volju, teško je zaobići" (252).



West and other conspiracy theories, which have always gone down well in the backward recesses of the guardians of our hearths.<sup>137</sup>

Lucidly, Zima likewise observes that the rift has developed between Ugrešić and Croatia is so great that neither side is likely to give or seek quarter, the mutual lack of interest apparently *intractable*. For the purposes of the present study Zima's review is most striking in that it makes the explicit link between Ugrešić's novel and post-WWII German *Trümmerliteratur*:

After the Second World War, when the Germans were in search of their own language and lost dignity, reduced to autodidacticism and autobiography, this writing model came to be known by the coinage *Trümmerliteratur*. In this literature of the ruins everything was condemned to the past: people and things, both of which had long since lost their original function.<sup>138</sup>

The final review was a blogpost that appeared on a somewhat marginal Internet portal (*lupiga.com*), and is noteworthy more for statistical purposes and the brief untranslatable exchange of comments between the reviewer and two respondents, one of whom was complaining that the review featured a picture of the English rather than newly-published Croatian edition of the novel.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "Ako se u Hrvatskoj aplaudira piscima o kojima u svijetu nitko ništa ne zna, dok se u inozemstvu prevode i tiskaju autori koje se u Hrvatskoj šikanira, onda se to ne može pripisati trulom Zapadu i teorijama urote, koje su u donjomrduškoj svijesti čuvara naših ognjišta uvijek imale dobru prođu" (252).

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "Poslije drugoga svjetskog rata, kada su Nijemci tragali za svojim jezikom i izgubljenim dostojanstvom, svedeni na autodidaktiku i autobiografiju, takav model pisanja određen je kovanicom *Trümmerliteratur*. U toj književnosti ruševina sve je osuđeno na prošlost: i ljudi i stvari, koje su davno izgubile svoju prvobitnu funkciju" (256).

<sup>139</sup> "Bozzo" [Božidar Alajbegović], review of *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* by Dubravka Ugrešić, <http://www.lupiga.com/knjige/opsirnije.php?id=1640> [accessed August 16, 2011]. That "Bozzo" is a pseudonym for Božidar Alajbegović is revealed by the fact that the same review later appeared under Alajbegović's own name on his personal blog: <http://knjigoljub.blog.hr/2006/09/1621552647/kritika-dubravka-ugresic-muzej-bezuvjetne-predaje-konzorsamizdat-b92-2002.html>. Of the three comments on the review, the first simply states, "Naturally, no one's commenting on this one" ("Ovo, naravno, nitko ne komentira") the

*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* was not published in French until 2004, a long seven years after the first Dutch edition, and six years after the English and German editions (at least half a dozen other translations also appeared in the intervening years). All 12 of the Francophone reviews located for the purposes of this study were very positive (if for the most part rather predictable), and a handful seemed to be closely based on the same press release. To greater or lesser extents, all reviews mentioned Ugrešić's personal and political circumstances, proving, if it were ever necessary, that the work of a writer such as Ugrešić crosses borders with significantly more baggage than the writer him- or herself. The reviews are marked by two characteristics: firstly, a complete collapse of the difference between Ugrešić and her narrator; and secondly—largely a result of the first—a number of erroneous claims and assumptions.

Writing for *Libération*, Natalie Levisalles claims that the five women in the “group photograph” (taken when the angel Alfred descends) are “without doubt ‘the witches of Zagreb’ [sic] the female intellectuals accused in 1993 of ‘working against the interests of Croatia.’”<sup>140</sup> Although it is never stated in the novel, Levisalles writes that the narrator has lost her family, an assumption apparently based on the fact that she is an exile. Making matters worse, wanting to cite one of the narrator's fellow “exiles,” Levisalles tragicomically selects “the over-emotional Lucy Skrzydelko” (who is not an exile at all, but rather, an American of

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second, “I was just thinking that myself” (“upravo sam to i ja mislio”), and the third “Excellent!” (“Odlično!”).

<sup>140</sup> Natalie Levisalles, “Uniques objets: Inventaire d'exil par la Croate Dubravka Ugrešić,” *Libération*, October 21, 2004. French: “sans doute ‘les sorcières de Zagreb,’ ces intellectuelles accusées en 1993 de ‘porter atteinte aux intérêts de la Croatie.’”

Polish descent in love with the narrator's exilic fate) and her comment that "[i]f nothing else, it's comforting to think that every exile is input into one's one biography."<sup>141</sup>

Elegantly written (albeit with many phrases cribbed from the novel without attribution), Geneviève Brisac's review in *Le Monde des Livres* suggests that Ugrešić is not only the author of the novel, but also its first-person narrator.<sup>142</sup> The fact that Ugrešić's mother was Bulgarian seems to have left an unusually strong impression, Brisac twice noting that Ugrešić is of Bulgarian origin, the first time in bold text that follows the headline. In the same vein, the anonymously authored review in *Livres-Hebdo* confidently announces that Ugrešić was born in Zagreb (Ugrešić was in fact born in Kutina, a small town about 70km from Zagreb) to a Titoist officer and a Bulgarian mother.<sup>143</sup> The anonymous review in *Notes Bibliographiques* contains an odder error, the reviewer stating that the narrator's mother left Bulgaria in 1946, and that a *quarter of a century* later her daughter is a refugee in Berlin.<sup>144</sup> A similar temporal error blots Charles Ruelle's review, which states that Ugrešić's exile began in 1991 (it began in late-1993).<sup>145</sup>

Given Austria and Germany's stronger historical ties to eastern Europe and the upheavals of German reunification, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ugrešić's work is far better known in Germanophone Europe. Shortly after publication *The*

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<sup>141</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum*, 118-19. Croatian:

<sup>142</sup> Geneviève Brisac, "Les objets trouvés," *Le Monde des Livres*, October 8, 2004.

<sup>143</sup> M., J-M, "L'éléphant de mer et l'exilée croate," *Livres-Hebdo*, August 20, 2004.

<sup>144</sup> Review of Dubravka Ugrešić, *Le Musée des redditions sans condition*, *Notes Bibliographiques*, December 2004.

<sup>145</sup> Charles Ruelle, "De la Yougoslavie à Berlin-Est: un exil démystificateur," *Transfert*, September 2004.

*Museum of Unconditional Surrender* Ugrešić won the *Südwestrundfunk Literaturpreis* (at the time worth 15,000 German marks), and the novel itself spent several weeks on the bestseller lists. Overall, the 18 Germanophone reviews were significantly longer and more complex than the Francophone reviews, and reviewers were also far less likely to exclusively frame the novel as one about Yugoslavia and its break-up. Representatively, in the Viennese *Falter* Kirstin Breitenfellner writes:

In contrast to her last collection of essays these [stories] circle not so much the effects of the war on the collective mentality and the terror of imposed forgetting and remembering, but memory in and of itself, the relationship between reality and myth at the level of the individual.<sup>146</sup>

Helga Leiprecht in *Die Weltwoche* expresses a similar sentiment, maintaining that the novel is “underpinned and marked by the political catastrophe of Yugoslavia. But at the same time it strikes at the core of every life.”<sup>147</sup> Konrad Paul Liessmann in *Der Standard* offers the following refraction:

Ugrešić foregoes depicting the war in drastic colour, she doesn’t accuse and doesn’t judge, for her it is not about political morality or intellectual transcendence of the barbarianism of nationalism, but about very precise and discrete memory fragments from the perspective of a relatively privileged exile.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Kirstin Breitenfellner, “Im Magen des See-Elefanten,” *Falter*, June 5-11, 1998. German: “Im Gegensatz zu ihrem letzten Essayband kreisen diese aber nicht mehr so sehr um die Auswirkungen des Krieges auf die kollektive Mentalität und den Terror des oktroyierten Vergessens und Erinnerns, sondern um die Erinnerung als solche, das Verhältnis von Realität und Mythos auf individueller Ebene.”

<sup>147</sup> Helga Leiprecht, “Einbrennsuppe, Russ und Überraschungsei,” *Die Weltwoche*, May 14, 1998. German: “Die politische Katastrophe Jugoslawiens hat ihn begründet und geprägt. Gleichzeitig aber trifft er ins Innerste jedes Lebens.”

<sup>148</sup> Konrad Paul Liessmann, “Belichtete Biographien,” *Der Standard*, August 14, 1998. German: “Ugrešić verzichtet darauf, den Krieg in drastischen Farben zu schildern, sie klagt nicht an und verurteilt nicht, es geht ihr nicht um politische Moral oder intellektuelle Erhabenheit über die

Germanophone critics were also far more reluctant than their Francophone colleagues to apply an autobiographical matrix, Lotte Podgornik's comment in *Volkstimme* that "the biographical moment is undoubtedly only one [aspect] in this text"<sup>149</sup> being representative. Significantly, Podgornik also writes of *Trümmerleben*—life in the ruins—as one of the novel's key concerns, the thought echoed by Andreas Breitenstein in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, who writes of Ugrešić as a *Trümmerfrau* in reunified Berlin.<sup>150</sup> Unsurprisingly, German critics were also able to draw parallels between Ugrešić's concerns and the East German context. Roland Mischke in the *Handelsblatt* maintains that Ugrešić doesn't mourn the passing of Titoism, but "the protective shield of biographical identity,"<sup>151</sup> a mourning he asserts is shared by former GDR citizens. Two critics also hit on points that concur with my own reading of the novel, the first, Jörg Plath in the *Berliner Zeitung*, suggesting that a "person who elevates the name of a museum to the title of her novel doesn't want to be a museum exhibit, but a curator,"<sup>152</sup> and the second, Anke Westphal in *Die Tageszeitung*, suggesting that the novel is Ugrešić's attempt "to fuse postmodernism and morality."<sup>153</sup>

The Germanophone reviews were, however, not free of factual errors. Breitenstein, Iris Radisch in *Die Zeit*, Eckhard Thiele in the *Berliner Morgenpost*,

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Barbarei des Nationalismus, sondern um sehr genaue und diskrete Erinnerungsfragmente aus der Perspektive einer vergleichsweise privilegierten Exilantin."

<sup>149</sup> Lotte Podgornik, "Erinnern und Vergessen," *Volkstimme*, July 1998. German: "Das biographische Moment ist zweifellos nur eines in diesem Text."

<sup>150</sup> Andreas Breitenstein, "Abtrünnige Tochter," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, April 30, 1998.

<sup>151</sup> Roland Mischke, "Das Exil hat keine schützende Hülle," *Handelsblatt*, October 29, 1998. German: "die schützende Hülle biographischer Identität."

<sup>152</sup> Jörg Plath, "Ein schöner, etwas verwirrter Engel," *Berliner Zeitung*, July 18-19, 1998. German: "Wer den Namen eines Museums zum Titel seines Buches erhebt, will kein Museumsstück sein, sondern Kurator."

<sup>153</sup> Anke Westphal, "Das Exil ist eine Art Paranoia," *Die Tageszeitung*, May 6, 1998. German: "Postmoderne und Moral zu verschmelzen."

and Beatrix Langner in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* all erroneously state that Ugrešić went into exile after having lost her job at the University of Zagreb (she resigned), the consistency of the error suggesting they were regurgitating material from a poor press release. In *Die Presse* Karl-Markus Gauß writes that Ugrešić went into exile in 1992, in *WeiberDiwan* Carmen Unterholzer writes that it was in 1995 after the publication of *The Culture of Lies*, while in the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* Cornelia Kraus writes that Ugrešić was thirty in 1988 when *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* won the prestigious Yugoslav NIN literary prize (she was forty).

The only ambivalent review appeared in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, with Beatrix Langner somewhat obliquely suggesting that the novel is an exhausting trip through the stations in life of a writer-in-exile, which function as props for the aestheticization of one's personal biographical drama—whatever this is supposed to mean. In several passages that are almost beyond parody, Langner also reveals an unnerving fondness for the word “totalitarian.” She writes of the novel as being about “the fragmentation of personal histories after the collapse of east European totalitarianism,”<sup>154</sup> later noting “the fragility of post-totalitarian biographies.”<sup>155</sup> In the same vein she describes Ugrešić as a writer who—outside Croatia—has made her name with books and essays that “with subjective verve and remarkable narrative talent”<sup>156</sup> deal with “the cultural exchange between

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<sup>154</sup> Beatrix Langner, “Herren des Krieges, Herren der Träumer,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 25-6, 1998. German: “die Fragmentarisierung von Lebensläufen nach dem Zusammenbruch des osteuropäischen Totalitarismus.”

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. German: “die Brüchigkeit posttotalitärer Biographien.”

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. German: “mit subjektiver Verve und beachtlichem Erzähl talent.”

western (postmodern) and eastern (post-totalitarian) thinking.”<sup>157</sup> Before 1991 almost no serious Yugoslav writer would have claimed that he or she lived in a “totalitarian” state, let alone one that had missed the boat on postmodernism.

In terms of the 18 Anglophone reviews I would begin by looking at a particularly cringeworthy piece, which the reviewer herself no doubt thought wonderfully supportive. Reviewing *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* alongside Slavenka Drakulić’s *S.: A Novel about the Balkans*<sup>158</sup> for the *Women’s Review of Books*, Valerie Jablow implies that Ugrešić and Slavenka Drakulić are somehow “sisterly” writers, a wildly superficial suggestion and one frequently ridiculed by South Slavic scholars.<sup>159</sup> Jablow claims “both [Ugrešić and Drakulić] moved in a circle of intellectuals admired and feared for their subversive potential in a state [Yugoslavia] where media control and antifeminism were the norm,”<sup>160</sup> precisely the kind of slovenly rhetoric Ugrešić has so often sought to refute. Likewise, left unqualified, the accusation of Yugoslav (i.e. *retrograde communist*) antifeminism reads as a last burst of Cold War-era triumphalism about the progressive West and backward East. In truth, communist ideology and legislative programmes were in many respects far more progressive for women than their capitalist counterparts, and in past two decades of “transition” many previous legal protections enjoyed by women have been rolled back—in the name of “progress,” of course.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid. German: “die kulturelle Vermittlung zwischen westlichem (postmodernen) und östlichem (posttotalitärem) Denken.”

<sup>158</sup> This is the ghastly American title of the novel; in the UK it was published *As If I Am Not There*, which is a direct translation of the original Croatian—*Kao da me nema*.

<sup>159</sup> On the crucial differences between Ugrešić and Drakulić see Andrea Zlatar, “Pisanje u egzilu/azilu: Muzej bezuvjetne predaje i Ministarstvo boli u kontekstu proze Dubravke Ugrešić,” *Tekst, tijelo, trauma: ogledi o suvremenoj ženskoj književnosti* (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2004).

<sup>160</sup> Valerie Jablow, “No Place like Home,” *Women’s Review of Books* 8, no. 6 (March 2000).

Other clichés abound in Jablow’s review: mentioning the war in Yugoslavia Jablow reminds readers that she is referring to “the most recent one, not the centuries’ worth of others waged on its soil and subsumed in history.”<sup>161</sup> As Maria Todorova has compellingly demonstrated, the myth of the Balkans as somehow more “bloody” than other regions of Europe is both a western projection and abnegation of its own bloody history. To make matters worse, Jablow’s piece is poorly written. She writes of Yugoslavia and its citizens “being fragmented into relics”<sup>162</sup> (since when was a relic a fragment of a whole?), and Yugoslavia being “carved into being”<sup>163</sup> after the First World War. The first Yugoslavia (the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) practically “mushroomed into being,” gaining a territorial coherence the south Slav lands had never previously enjoyed. (Modern day Hungary, which lost two-thirds of its territory after the Treaty of Triannon, was indeed “*carved* into being.”). Jablow’s ignorance of European geography hits an even lower point when she describes Berlin as “a sort of crossroads of East and West, Europe and *Asia*”<sup>164</sup> (my emphasis).

Carole Angier’s review in *The Independent* (a joint review with *The Culture of Lies*, which in the United Kingdom was concurrently published by Phoenix House) also contained a clumsy misreading. Angier opens with the suggestion that “[i]f you want to manipulate people, traumatise them first. Start a war, or tell them they have been in one for a thousand years. That is what the Serb

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.



leaders did, and then the Croats.”<sup>165</sup> The reality is that the “thousand-year-dream” is an exclusively Croatian myth based on the medieval Kingdom of Tomislav and the discovery of the Baska Tablet, while the foundational myth of modern Serbia is the 1389 Battle of Kosovo. This error notwithstanding, the review was generally very positive—although not exclusively so. Angier writes that “[t]hese two books about the dismemberment of Yugoslavia contain some of the most profound reflections on culture, memory and madness you will ever read. They also contain some bloated academic writing.”<sup>166</sup> Likewise, in an otherwise glowing review in the *New York Times Review of Books*, Richard Eder suggests that Ugrešić’s writing can be occasionally “overmannered,” “[s]cattershot and posturing,” “dimmed by fictional and symbolic inflation,” and that there is “much that is arbitrary and self-indulgent.”<sup>167</sup> These two reviews (in important publications) pointedly illustrate that although *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* was certainly celebrated by foreign critics, this celebration was not without its caveats. Finally, the following excerpt from a thoughtful review by Carolyn Kuebler in the *Twin Cities Reader* offers evidence that the imaginations of “dumb foreigners” are not always fired by (geo)political reportage, but by smaller personal details:

While the horrors of war are what grab our interest, they tend to obscure the day-to-day character of a place, exoticizing it with bombs and enormous emotional watersheds. In her new book, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (New Directions), Croatian author Dubravka Ugrešić cuts through the vague language of the nightly news and CNN, and brings us an intimate look at the underlying texture of the Serbo-Croatian conflict. By not dwelling on the particulars of the war’s politics, or even

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<sup>165</sup> Carole Angier, “An exile’s memories of home,” *The Independent*, October 5, 1998.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Richard Eder, “Treating Exile as a Separate Country,” *New York Times Review of Books*, November 9, 1998.

taking sides, she strips the war—and all wars—of heroics. To this author, and her family and friends, the fighting is a sad repetition of historical events that they endure as they would any natural disaster. Without nationalistic fervor or the martyred stance of the exile, Dubravka Ugrešić exposes the meaninglessness of such notions and the lies that they force people to live. This leaves no room for confident proclamations or even passionate antiwar preaching. Instead, Dubravka Ugrešić digs through the debris, allowing chance connections and the lives of individuals to create their own meaning, beauty, and political consciousness.<sup>168</sup>

Taken together, the Croatian, Francophone, Germanophone, and Anglophone reviews of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* affirm that Jančar was at least partially right in his assertion regarding post-1989 east European literature not standing a chance at home or abroad. Given that the novel was Ugrešić's first published in Croatia since 1988, it was hardly treated as the "literary event" that it should have been—particularly considering all that had happened in the meantime, both to the country and to Ugrešić. While abroad the novel (published almost simultaneously with *The Culture of Lies*) won Ugrešić critical acclaim and perhaps the first real tranche of the symbolic cultural capital she enjoys to this day, its reception (at least in the language areas glossed here) was nonetheless often marked by a sloppy combination of factual and contextual errors, unhelpful projections, and the constricted horizon of expectations with which western critics have historically "abused" literature from eastern Europe. It is likewise instructive to remember that despite the novel's critical acclaim and the attention it continues to attract in east European literary and cultural studies, it has only enjoyed second printings in a handful of the twenty-or-so countries in which it has been published.

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<sup>168</sup> Carolyn Kuebler, "The Curator of Oblivion," *Twin Cities Reader*, November 24, 1999.

## 4. DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ: MINISTARSTVO BOLI (2004)

### 4.1 “Homesick and sick of home”

Concluding his review of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Serbian critic Teofil Pančić stated that the novel “appears as the natural and highly successful completion of a particular ‘cycle,’ as the conclusion of a difficult and challenging chapter; a reckoning with the consequences and (epi)phenomena of the disintegration of the ‘world of yesterday.’”<sup>1</sup> It must then have come as a surprise, and not just to Pančić, that Ugrešić’s next novel, *The Ministry of Pain*, would actually be a companion piece to *Museum*, the second part of a diptych. If *Museum* was primarily a novel of museums and the technologies of memory, its chronotope dispersed throughout the ruins of the European twentieth century, *The Ministry of Pain* narrows its focus to post-1989 eastern Europe, and more directly, to the Atlantis of Yugoslavia. In contrast to the resigned and occasionally bittersweet tone of its predecessor, *The Ministry of Pain* is a novel of aporias and impasses: a story that is as nostalgic as it is critical of nostalgia, a novel about being simultaneously “homesick and sick of home,”<sup>2</sup> and about both the necessity of remembering and the disquieting virtues of forgetting. Covering the thematic triptych of *Krieg*, *Trümmer*, and *Heimkehr* programmatically outlined by Böll, *The Ministry of Pain* is the novel that perhaps most fully realises the idea of a post-1989 “literature of the ‘east European ruins.’”

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<sup>1</sup> Teofil Pančić, “Fircanje Teksta (I Sveta),” review of *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Vreme*, February 13, 2003. Croatian: “*Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* doima se kao prirodno, vrlo uspelo okončanje jednog ‘ciklusa,’ kao zaokruživanje teške koliko i izazovne etape iliti oduživanje duga poslasticama i (epi)fenomenima raspada ‘jučerašnjeg sveta.’”

<sup>2</sup> Boym uses the phrase to describe a group of twentieth-century intellectuals whom she refers to as “off-modernists”: “At once homesick and sick of home, they developed a peculiar kind of diasporic intimacy, a survivalist aesthetics of estrangement and longing” (*Future of Nostalgia*, xix).

In this chapter I follow the dialectics of the ruins through which *The Ministry of Pain* makes its way: the ruins of the language formerly known as “Serbo-Croatian” (or in its Croatian variant, “Croato-Serbian”); the ruins of post-Yugoslav selves; the ruins of “Yugoslav” literature and the very function of literature; the ruins of the proscribed Yugoslav everyday and the very idea of the country. Finally, through the prism of the novel’s setting, Amsterdam, I consider the novel’s recurring dialectic of “East” and “West,” both their enduring reification, and the places in which these reifications are themselves in ruins.

#### **4.2 Trümmerleute**

Set in Amsterdam in the wake of the Yugoslav wars, *The Ministry of Pain* is narrated in the first person by a Croatian exile named Tanja, a temporary lecturer in Yugoslav literature at the University of Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> Tanja is under no illusion that, for her class of young war-traumatized Yugoslav refugees, literary studies are only a pretext to retain temporary Dutch residency. Most are somewhere in their twenties (we suspect that Tanja is in her mid-thirties), and at least for the men, Amsterdam is a refuge from mobilisation. She refers to both herself and her students as “convalescents” and puts it plainly: “[t]he house was in ruins, and it was my job to clear a path through the rubble.”<sup>4</sup> While the

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<sup>3</sup> Given that Ugrešić herself spent a year teaching South Slavic literature at the University of Amsterdam in the mid-1990s, she prefaces *The Ministry of Pain* with a similar declaration to that which preceded *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, unambiguously stating that “[i]n the novel readers have before them everything is imagined: the narrator, her story, the situation and characters. Even the place of action, Amsterdam, is not entirely real” (n.p.). Croatian: “U romanu koji stoji pred čitaocima sve je izmišljeno: pripovjedačica, njezina priča, situacije i likovi. Čak ni mjesto događaja, Amsterdam, nije suvišno stvarno” (n.p.). This declaration again serves to disabuse would-be literary police from attempts to read the novel as confessional or autobiographical.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 34. Croatian: “kuća se rušila. Od mene se očekivalo da u gomili ruševina nađem neki prolaz i krenem” (44).

*Trümmerleute* of *The Ministry of Pain* share identical characteristics to those described in the essay from *The Culture of Lies* cited earlier, they emerge not only as “people of the ruins,” but also as people in ruins. Responding to Tanja’s survey of what he expects from her classes, Uroš, a student who will later put a bullet in his skull, simply states, “to come to”—in the sense of regaining consciousness, to wake from a nightmare. Towards the end of the novel, another student, Meliha, appears to speak for the group:

“Sometimes I think I’m going mad. I’ll be walking along, and suddenly I have to stop and pick up the pieces, the pieces of myself. My arms, my legs, and phew! there’s my crazy head. You don’t know how glad I am to find them. So anyway I glue them together and they hold for a while. I think that’s it for good, and then I’m in pieces again. And again I pick them up and put myself together like a jigsaw puzzle until the next time.”<sup>5</sup>

The novel opens with Tanja at a tram stop, staring at a glass-encased city map, barely suppressing the urge to smash her head against it.<sup>6</sup> This need to physically hurt is reprised throughout the novel—visceral pain as a means of “coming to” and colouring the blank Polaroid that is her self-portrait. At home she scars her hand running it back and forth over a radiator, and on a visit to the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal in The Hague she imagines Oskar Mazerath letting out a scream, the glass shards shattering the court’s apparent artificiality and reifying in blood the very real pain of the Yugoslav wars. Only in the novel’s climactic scene, handcuffed to a chair, soaked in urine and tears, with a very real

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 178. Croatian: “Ponekad mi se čini da ću poludjeti . . . Hodam tako, skupljam samu sebe, svoju vlastite komade . . . Eno mi noge, a eno mi i ruke, baš fino, a eno i moje lude glave . . . Pravo se razveselim što sam našla neki komad . . . Slijepim komade, držim se tako jedno vrijeme, mislim sve je u redu, a onda opet puknem . . . I opet ispočetka, slažem samu sebe kao puzzle, sve dok me nešto opet ne rasturi” (219).

<sup>6</sup> This opening, with the narrator again standing in front of a glass case, can also be understood as an intertextual reference to *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*.

mark of humiliation on her face and three neat razor cuts on the top of her wrist, is Tanja able to let out a scream of her own, one which signals both her own final disintegration and her first hope for eventual “coming to.”

As in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, in *The Ministry of Pain* post-Yugoslavs and eastern Europeans collectively recognise and seek comfort from one and other, marked by the same invisible slap of humiliation on their faces. Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, and Bulgarians patronize Amsterdam’s Yugoslav social clubs. In this community of outcasts, explaining that a certain Marsha is “one of his people,” a Bosnian refugee spends all his money on a Russian prostitute (who repeatedly rips him off) and vows that he would never give his money to a “soul-less” German.

In *The Captive Mind* Miłosz suggested that in his relationship with the West, the east European intellectual often resembles a disappointed lover, one for whom a “sediment of sarcasm” is all that remains of the affair.<sup>7</sup> Reading Tanja’s caustic accounts of the relationship between the Yugoslav *Trümmerleute* and Dutch society, one can at times be forgiven for thinking that Miłosz was on to something; that Cioran got it right when he claimed that “the pride of a man born in a small culture is forever wounded.”<sup>8</sup> Tanja deflates the hypocrisy of Dutch liberalism, recalling how the authorities were much more generous in granting residence permits to Yugoslavs claiming they had been victims of sexual discrimination (i.e. that they were gay) than to the female victims of mass rape.

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<sup>7</sup> Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 183.

And she observes how in a “reunified” Europe her students feel marked as “foreigners,” “refugees,” “savages,” “the beneficiaries of political asylum,” as “the fallout of Balkanization,” as “children of postcommunism,”<sup>9</sup> constantly battling stereotypes generated by Dutch tabloid reports on the “Yugo-mafia” and its criminal activities. Yet Tanja is far from blind to her compatriots’ own prejudices, noting their talent for referring to their hosts in pejoratives—Germans becoming “Krauts,” the Dutch “*Dačer*” (“Dutchies”) and so forth. Even Tanja’s mother in Zagreb shows a surprising ability to dig into the repertoire of East-West stereotypes with a comment about tasteless Dutch tomatoes.<sup>10</sup>

Nowhere, however, is the East-West divide more clearly depicted than in the tenant-landlord relationship between the eastern *Trümmerleute* and their western hosts, a relationship that signals the enduring division of “the European family” into favoured sons and bastard outsiders. When Tanja’s contract at the university is not renewed (ostensibly due to budget cuts) the Head of Department “radiates sincerity” in telling her how sorry he is, but never makes the mistake of asking where she will go now. When he refuses to provide a letter promising employment for the next year on the grounds that doing so would be a lie, Tanja, almost in tears, points out that “the authorities don’t care about truth; they care about documents.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense the Iron Curtain appears to have been replaced by one sewn at Schengen, and—as Tanja has been warned—the

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<sup>9</sup> See *Ministry*, 52; *Ministarstvo*, 64.

<sup>10</sup> We might also here add Tanja’s self-knowledge when watching Philip Kaufman’s adaptation of Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Initially annoyed by the film’s “poeticization” of the communist everyday (images of run-down Czech spas and men playing poolside chess), she wonders if her irritation is really only the reflexive arrogance of the colonized against the colonizer—east Europeans being the former, and Kaufman as a metonym for Hollywood and the West the latter. (See *Ministry*, 230-31; *Ministarstvo*, 276)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Croatian: “Vlasti ne zanima istina nego potvrda” (232).

Dutch respect for other people's privacy is often a perfect mask for actual indifference. The episode likewise illustrates exactly how the dispossessed come to resent the *Gemütlichkeit* of the domiciled.

As Tanja explains, the Yugoslav wars brought on new great migrations, within the borders of the disintegrating country, out into Europe, and further on to America and Canada—“[w]e were everywhere,” she observes. Reconciled with the occupation of her and husband Goran's Zagreb apartment by the family of a Croatian soldier, she quietly states that in a time of settling scores, vengeance was taken against whoever was closest to hand, and that those closest to hand were most often the innocent. As she explains in one of several similar refractions:

The war was a fig leaf for everything. It was something like the national lottery: while many tried their luck out of genuine misfortune, others did it simply because the opportunity presented itself. And under such aberrant circumstances, winners and losers had to be judged by new criteria.<sup>12</sup>

Yet Tanja is always brutally frank about her status within the general disorder of things. She acknowledges that the war has also been an alibi for her choices, that her justification for not accompanying her husband Goran to Japan (because she was “from here, from Western Europe”) was at best selective. She remains conscious of the fact that she is not a refugee, and questions whether she has subconsciously appropriated the misfortune of others in order to justify her non-

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 11-12. Croatian: “Rat je bio pokriće za sve, nešto poput narodne lutrije. Mnogi su iz stvarne nesreće i gubitka krenuli da okušaju sreću, drugi su naprosto iskoristili situaciju. Dobici i gubici u takvim nenormalnim okolnostima mjerili su se nekim drugim mjerama” (18).



return to Zagreb. On the other hand, maintaining her dialectic, she movingly questions why the war and the disintegration of her country are not good enough excuses.

### 4.3 Amsterdam

With reference to St. Petersburg, Svetlana Boym reminds us of Benjamin's suggestion that "in the ruin history physically merged into (natural) setting,"<sup>13</sup> and explains that

[t]hese ruins are not elegiac but rather dialectical; they suggest the coexistence of many historical layers, the plurality of possibilities. The ruin is a kind of spatialization of history, an image of what Benjamin called "dialectic at a standstill," where various visions of the city clash and coexist.<sup>14</sup>

In this respect, the Berlin of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* was not only a surrealist city, but also the ruin-city *par excellence*. The Amsterdam of *The Ministry of Pain* is shaped not by the figure of the ruin or any necessarily surreal quality, but by its very *unreality*. For Tanja, Amsterdam is a city, which, while "beautiful," is accompanied by "an almost physical absence," its scents and smells somehow laundered, its physicality eviscerated. In a 2006 interview Ugrešić called Amsterdam "a perfect metaphor" for the novel, underlining the transient quality of a city built on sand; wind and water reducing everything to ephemera, the ineluctability of oblivion. Seeing water surface from holes left as rotting beams of a house under demolition are removed, and watching workers reset the

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<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 136.

cobblestones of city's streets, Tanja notes that "[s]and provided the city with a metaphorical and literal foundation."<sup>15</sup> But this constantly shifting foundation metaphorically erases her internal maps of the city, her *flâneuse's* tracks constantly washing away. Admitting to feeling like Alice in Wonderland, she worries that should she lose her footing she might fall into a hole and end up in a different world—echoing the fate of the Berlin *flâneur* from *Museum* who would fall through the thin crust of the city's asphalt. Troubled by a persistent "anxiety of absence," she scrubs and redecorates two *temporary* apartments, only to realise her internal space is more dislocated than the space around her.

The novel's first chapter opens with a citation from *In the Dutch Mountains* in which Cees Nooteboom suggests that the flat northern landscape "makes for absolutism," that people's visibility makes the Dutch and their behaviour tend more towards confrontation than contact: "They have no hiding places. Not even their homes can be considered as such. They leave their curtains open and regard this as a virtue."<sup>16</sup> Befitting Tanja's status as a post-Yugoslav *Trümmerfrau*, the Slavic Department rents her a souterrain apartment near the *demi-monde* of the red-light district. Like the Berlin narrator of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, in Amsterdam Tanja suffers from a disconcerting excess of time, and in elliptical passages throughout the novel she offers cerebral and emotional observations about the city. Although she sees the ornamentation on the city's houses as their inhabitants' attempts to ward off the fear of evanescence, her own endless train journeys are born of a related fear, of a need

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<sup>15</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 28. Croatian: "Pijesak je bio metaforički i stvarni temelj grada" (37).

<sup>16</sup> Here I have cited the published English translation of Nooteboom's novel, rather than the translation that appears on page 3 of *The Ministry of Pain*. See Cees Nooteboom, *In the Dutch Mountains*, trans. Adrienne Dixon (London: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 2.

to establish semantic and external coordinates, to locate fixed points of reference. This fear of disappearing is shared by her fellow Yugoslav exiles in Amsterdam, who, grieving for lost environments and places of memory, desperately search for surrogates in their new surroundings—for their benches on the waterfront, their town squares, their local cafés.

In *City Sister Silver* Jáchym Topol observes that the postcommunist “movement of nations began in the brothels.”<sup>17</sup> As in Topol’s Czechoslovakia, in the Amsterdam of *The Ministry of Pain* new east European *Trümmerfrauen* perform the same function as their post-war WWII antecedents. From the live dolls in the windows of the red-light district to its porn shops that resemble toyshops and coffee shops decorated like kindergartens, Amsterdam appears to Tanja as a world of “urban infantilism,” an adult playground. Visiting Madurodam,<sup>18</sup> a “Dutch Disneyland,” she thinks she has finally located the perfect metaphor: Amsterdam is a “doll’s house,” life performed in miniature. Recalling a group of American tourists gathered around an old organ grinder and their gushing at how “cute” he is, using the Dutch equivalent of “cute”—*leuk*—she punctures the misunderstanding:

*Leukness* was a kind of antiseptic, a disinfectant that removed all spots, all bumps, put everything on an equal footing, made everything acceptable. Near my house there was a gay bar called the Quinn’s Head with a display of ten male dolls, ten Kens, in the window. It was a *leuk* display. Whenever I passed it, I thought of the live Barbies—young women from Moldova, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Belarus—the traffickers, traders in human flesh,

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<sup>17</sup> Topol, *City Sister Silver*, 235.

<sup>18</sup> Built in 1952 Madurodam is a miniature city located in Scheveningen, The Hague (also home to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia). This replica of a Dutch town at a scale of 1:25 features many prominent Dutch landmarks, buildings, and monuments.

bought up for export. I thought of the fresh East European flesh setting off on the long journey west. If it didn't get bogged down in some Serbian or Bosnian backwoods, it would end up here. I thought of them and of the Eastern European Kens who had come to this Disneyland to entertain the grown-up male children here; to give them alien flesh in which to insert their male members. How *leuk* it all was. And what is *leuk* is beyond good and evil: it is amoral, not immoral; it is simply take it or leave it.<sup>19</sup>

Taken together, Tanja's experiences of Amsterdam as a place "where everything is simulation, nothing is real,"<sup>20</sup> are representative of how she perceives the East-West dialectic as a whole. Her unflinching reworking of Philip Roth's assertion of the West as a place where "everything goes and nothing matters" (as opposed to the East where "nothing goes and everything matters"<sup>21</sup>) suggests a dialectic in which the West is ephemera and the East viscera: in a Europe united by commerce, the West will provide the cash and the eastern body will be a tradable commodity. But rather than moralize Tanja quickly calls into question her reliability as a narrator, wondering if she is using Amsterdam as a projection screen for her own nightmares and giving things meanings that are just not there. Imagining Amsterdam's heart pumping with candyfloss in place of blood, she wonders if it is in fact her own heart that is broken.

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<sup>19</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 79. Croatian: "*Leuk* je bilo neka vrsta antispetika, dezinfekcijskog sredstva koje briše sve mrlje, sve zaglađuje, sve stavlja u isti red i čini sve dopustivim. U neposrednoj blizini moga stana nalazio se gay pub 'Quinn's Head,' s izlogom u kojem je bilo poredano dva-desetak muških lutaka, Kenova. Izložak je bio *leuk*. Prolazeći pored tih lutaka, prisjetila sam se onih stotina 'Barbika'—Moldavki, Bugarki, Ukrajinki, Bjeloruskinja—koje su trafikari, trgovci ljudskim mesom, kupovali po istočnoevropskom provincijama. Razmišljala sam o friškom istočnoevropskom mesu koje polazi na dug put, i ukoliko ne zaglavi u opurnim srpskim i bosanskim provincijama, kao roblje lokalnih policajaca i mafijaša, onda zaglavljuje ovdje. Mislila sam o toj novoj seriji istočnoevropskih 'Barbika,' ali i 'Kenova,' sretno prispjelih u ovaj Disneyland da služe za zabavu odrasloj muškoj djeci, da bi odrasli dječaci mogli u njihovo meso uvlačiti i izvlačiti svoja spolovila. Sve je, međutim, bilo *leuk*. A *leuk* je, kao i dječji svijet, lišen dobra i zla, on je amoralan, on je *take it or leave it*" (90).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 241. Croatian: "gdje je sve tek simulacija, i gdje ništa nije pravo" (286).

<sup>21</sup> Roth, *Shop Talk*, 53.

Whether Tanja is a reliable narrator or not, the novel's title suggests that cognitive dissonance mars the East-West relationship. "The Ministry of Pain" is what Tanja's refugee students call the tailor's shop where they work making S&M clothing for the Dutch porn industry. Having escaped a very real and involuntary "Ministry of Pain," young Yugoslavs work with leather, rubber, and latex to make accessories used to manufacture an ersatz pain for a (Western) recipient's pleasure: in this lexicon of East-West (mis)understanding, "pain" clearly requires a double entry.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague, which Tanja and a student, Igor, visit in the wake of Uroš's suicide, underscores a broader concern about *unreality* in a mediated world. Watching the trial of Uroš's father, the entire "show" mediated by television monitors, glass screens, translators, and the robotic reading of prepared statements, Tanja ponders whether this mediation has made the crimes of the accused unreal, whether with "one blissful, conciliatory *delete*" they could be made to disappear. Even Uroš's father, "a middle-aged man in a gray suit with lacklustre eyes, and a potatoey complexion"<sup>22</sup> doesn't seem credible as a war criminal. Echoing her feelings of guilt by association when in Amsterdam's red-light district, Tanja remarks:

It was the image of the perverted reality in which all of us, perverted as we were, were accomplices. In a way there was no difference between me, who sat there glued to the TV screen, and Uroš's father, who sat glued to his screen reading out canned responses in a metallic voice.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 140. Croatian: "Bio je čovjek srednjih godina u sivom odijelu, s licem krumpiraste boje i tupim pogledom" (156).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "Bila je to slika ispervertirane realnosti u kojoj samo, i sami ispervertirani, svi sudjelovali. I u tom smislu nije bilo razlike između mene, koja sam refleksno upravljala pogled

Tanja savages all involved in the war: those who killed, those who ordered killings, those who rabidly supported such killings, and those who photographed them to win prestigious prizes. When Igor mocks the Tribunal for its apparent modesty, its dramatic failings in comparison with Nuremberg or Eichmann in Jerusalem, Tanja maintains her ability to see both sides of everything, raging: “Look, those people are trying to clean up the shit we left behind. Because we don't feel obliged to do it ourselves. Because it doesn't even smell so bad to us!”<sup>24</sup>

#### **4.4 Reflective Nostalgia, *Jugonostalgija*, *Ostalgie***

As outlined earlier, as Yugoslavia descended into war Ugrešić's melancholic suspicion that the peoples of Yugoslavia were being allowed to carry so very little of their pasts into the new time quickly resulted in the accusation of *Jugonostalgija* (Yugonostalgia). This nostalgia—the Yugoslav variant of *Ostalgie*—is, however, inevitably more complex than nostalgia for communism or the vanished Yugoslav state, and certainly cannot be singularly reduced to this. In *The Ministry of Pain* Ugrešić suggests nostalgia as one of the few salvage mechanisms available to peoples of the former Yugoslavia to reaffirm that their lives did not begin with the country's death.

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prema televizijskom ekranu, i Uroševa oca koji je metalnim glasom čitao vlastite replike s kompjuterskog ekrana” (159).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 145-6. Croatian: “Tu se neki ljudi trude da počiste naša govna! Zato što mi nemamo potrebe da ih čistimo! Zato što nama naša govna mirišu!” (162).

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, one of the relatively few attempts to treat the phenomenon of postcommunist nostalgia seriously,<sup>25</sup> Svetlana Boym notes that as it is generally understood, “nostalgia is something of a bad word, an affectionate insult at best.”<sup>26</sup> And indeed, in the postcommunist period, few phenomena have been more stigmatized. As Anna Saunders observes, in the context of the former German Democratic Republic, *Alltagsgeschichte* (the History of the Everyday) has come to be regarded as a serious form of academic enquiry, one able to counter mass-produced representations of the GDR as a “Stasi state.” *Ostalgie*, on the other hand, has retained its pejorative inflection.<sup>27</sup> However, if *Ostalgie* is understood as an umbrella term for all postcommunist nostalgias, much of the problem appears to lie in the slippery nature of the term: is the Ostalgie’s alleged *Ostalgie* simply a longing for the preservation of their personal *Alltagsgeschichte*?

In the years following German reunification Ostalgies were routinely accused of performing a kind of historical elision, of sanitising GDR reality and selectively championing aspects of “everyday life” in order to normalize the abnormal political epoch and geography in which they had lived. Such a rose-tinted refraction was seen as a threat to both German unity and any honest “working through” of the past. On the other hand, as Saunders and others have argued, for many East Germans *Ostalgie* represented not only a desire to preserve minimal

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<sup>25</sup> Mitja Velikonja’s comprehensive sociological study, *Titostalgia: A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz* (Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2008), should also be noted here, as should Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille’s edited collection *Post-communist Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Boym, *Nostalgia*, xiv.

<sup>27</sup> Anna Saunders, “‘Normalising’ the Past: East German Culture and Ostalgie” in *German Culture, Politics, and Literature into the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Paul Cooke and Stuart Taberner, (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), 89-103.

continuity with their pre-*Wende* lives, but an instinctive reaction to the profound disorientation and disappointment many felt in a “reunification” process they had come to perceive as an *Anschluss*.

The problems of East German *Ostalgie*, however, of what people were supposed to do with their memories, played out as dwarf dramas in comparison to the disputes over *Jugonostalgija* in the years of and after the Yugoslav collapse. While the post-1989 erasure of the communist past is to some extent common across eastern Europe—the renaming of streets, dismantling of monuments, institutional restructuring, renovation of the media and consumer landscape—amid the rupture of the wars for independence, the past’s erasure was undoubtedly most violent in the Yugoslav successor states. Tanja explains:

With the disappearance of the country came the feeling that the life lived in it must be erased. The politicians who came to power were not satisfied with power alone; they wanted their new countries to be populated by zombies, people with no memory. They pilloried the Yugoslav past and encouraged people to renounce their former lives and forget them. Literature, movies, pop music, jokes, television, newspapers, consumer goods, languages, people—we were supposed to forget them all. A lot of it ended up at the dump in the form of film stock and photographs, books and manuals, documents and monuments—“Yugonostalgia,” the remembrance of life in that ex-country, became another name for political subversion.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 51-2. Croatian: “S nestankom zemlje i pamćenje na život u njoj moralo je biti izbrisano. Novim vlastodržcima nije bila dovoljna samo vlast: u novim državama trebali su živjeti ‘zombiji,’ ljudi bez sjećanja. Jugoslavenska prošlost bila je izvrgnuta javnom ruglu, ljudi su bili pozvani da se odreknu bivšeg života i zaborave ga. Filmovi, knjige, pop-glazba, vicevi, televizija, proizvodi, novine, vijesti, jezik, ljudi—sve je to trebalo biti zaboravljeno. I mnogo toga završilo je na smeću: knjige, filmske trake, fotografije, udžbenici, dokumenti, spomenici . . . ‘Jugonostalgija,’ sjećanje na život u bivšoj zemlji, postala je drugo ime za političku subverziju” (64).



In an elegiac essay for Yugoslavia entitled *Twilight of the Idols*, from his new Slovenian homeland in the north, poet Aleš Debeljak in 1994 wrote of his *tuga za jugom*—a kind of homesickness or sadness for the south—Yugoslavia etymologically meaning “land of the South Slavs.” Debeljak’s homesickness is caught in a yearning for the Dalmatian love songs Slovenian school kids liked to sing because their own alpine folk songs were always in a minor key; it is a sadness born of teenage memories of a concert in Ljubljana by Zagreb rockers, Azra, and the thought that while young Yugoslavs may have been of different faiths, singer Johnny Stulić was their prophet.<sup>29</sup> But as Debeljak is at pains to point out, whatever emotional resonance these memories have for him, they have nothing to do with the Yugoslav state. In Svetlana Boym’s typology, Debeljak’s “homesickness for the south” is a “reflective nostalgia,” one that lives in *algia*, in longing itself—ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary. In counterpoint, its opposite, “restorative nostalgia” resides in *nostos*—the return to a lost home. Believing itself the nation’s official memory, restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct this home, dusting off the relics of its forgotten iconography to create a single transhistorical narrative.<sup>30</sup> In these terms, the nostalgia with which *The Ministry of Pain* is concerned is, like Debeljak’s, a reflective nostalgia, a nostalgia that “lingers on ruins”<sup>31</sup> and functions as one of the few lines of defence against restorative national(ist) narratives.

Quickly abandoning the apparent futility of teaching a detonated literature, Tanja turns her classes into retrieval exercises, the exchange of memories of the

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<sup>29</sup> See Debeljak, *Twilight of the Idols*, 48-9.

<sup>30</sup> See Boym, *Nostalgia*, 40-55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

everyday life lived in a now vanished state. Inventing a game of convalescence, Tanja appoints herself curator of an imagined museum of Yugoslav everyday life, its contents to be metaphorically stored in one of this life's most ubiquitous objects: the red, blue, and white-striped "gypsy" bag. Together, she and her students compete to recall Titoist kitsch, slogans, songs, consumer goods, pop culture, films, TV series, clothes, food, social rituals, and jokes, gathering, in Boym's phrase, a "common corpus of emotional landmarks."<sup>32</sup> Given the organised forgetting of the Yugoslav everyday, this inventory of laughter and remembering comes to represent not only an attempt at convalescence, but moreover, a refusal to be reprogrammed as amnesiacs.

Ana writes about "the plastic bag with the red, white, and blue stripes," for which every east European nation refuses to acknowledge patrimony: "the poor man's luggage, the luggage of petty thieves and black marketeers, of weekend wheeler-dealers, of the flea-market-and-laundrette crowd, of refugees and the homeless."<sup>33</sup> Ownership signals membership of "the largest clan on earth."<sup>34</sup> Nevena recalls family shopping trips on the "first of the month," the day her factory worker father would get paid, but wonders uneasily why the story she has told, dreamlike and hazy, feels as if it belongs to someone else. Boban writes of a book he refers to as his favourite comic strip, which turns out to be his partisan grandfather's copy of *The Life and Work of V.I. Lenin, 1870-1924*. Ante recalls the rapture of dancing a "squeezer" with a certain Sanja Petrinić, while

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>33</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 48. Croatian: "prtljag sirotinje: sitnih lopova i švercera, kupaca i prekupaca, ljudi s buvljaka, hemijskih čistionica, perionica i jeftinih šnajderaja, prtljag emigranata, izbeglica i beskućnika"(60).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "najbrojnije pleme na svetu."

Meliha's contribution is simply a recipe for dish called "Bosnian Hotpot." Johanneke, the only "Dutchie" or non-Yugoslav in the class, writes of eating ice creams on her socialist family's Adriatic holidays. Selim writes of his rediscovery of a Macedonian poem, which he reads to his Dutch girlfriend in fluent Macedonian, amazed at his ability to recall a language he hasn't encountered since his school days.<sup>35</sup> Darko relates a memory implanted by his mother, of her as a Pioneer at Tito's birthday, refusing to let go of his hand.

In one of the longest entries, Mario provides an alternative "parallel" history of the second Yugoslavia, a history "no less valid than—the official one."<sup>36</sup> He recalls the yellow facades of the Austro-Hungarian train stations (the sight of which signals homecoming), trains in popular Yugoslav films and songs, the socialist youth brigades who volunteered to build railway tracks in the 1950s, trains for *Gastarbeiter* and keen cross-border shoppers. He remembers how the 1991 Serbian rebellion in the Croatian Krajina began with blocking the Zagreb-Split railway line, and that four years later, when these same Serbs departed the region for Serbia in the wake of the Croatian "Storm" offensive, they left by every possible means—by foot, bus, car, tractor, or horse-drawn cart—but not by train. Celebrating the Zagreb-Split line's re-opening (and the Serbian exodus), Croatian President Franjo Tuđman rode the so-called "Freedom Train." Mario concludes with the observation that for some, the fact that the word for train in Serbian and Croatian is different (Serbian *voz*, Croatian *vlak*) was enough to consider the war a "historical necessity." Here we might recall Tanja's earlier remark that with the

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<sup>35</sup> As Tanja muses at one point, the fact that generations of Yugoslavs' school reading lists included excerpts in Slovenian, Macedonian, Serbian in the Cyrillic script, and Croatian in the Latin script will very soon be forgotten.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 67. Croatian: "ne manje značajna od one službene" (78).

war, “Croats would eat their *kruh*, while Serbs would eat their *hleb*, Bosnians their *hljeb*: the word for bread in the three languages was different. *Smrt*, the word for death, was the same.”<sup>37</sup>

Igor offers what he (almost certainly falsely) claims is a friend’s commentary on a 1966 anthology of Yugoslav poetry; the salient observation that, of the 173 contributors, only six were women—one of whom wrote under a male pseudonym. Of the poems, 50 percent were about the poet’s “mama or the mamaland,” 20 percent about “the beauties of nature, you know, the seasons, the rainfall, crap like that,” 10 percent were horror stories capable of putting “the fear of God into Stephen King,” while another 10 percent belonged to the “me-me-me” school of poetry. No calculator is required to understand that Yugoslav poets “don’t care shit about sex.”<sup>38</sup> Uroš concludes his contribution on childhood humiliations with the brooding conclusion that, “Yugoslavia was a terrible place. Everybody lied. They still lie of course, but now each lie is divided in five, one per country.”<sup>39</sup>

As in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, in *The Ministry of Pain* Ugrešić maintains a clear distinction between nostalgia and the nostalgia industry. In their final confrontation, Igor warns Tanja that the Slovenian production of cassettes with Tito’s speeches is but a harbinger of Yugonostalgia’s soon-to-be exploited commercial potential. Yet the question that (re)emerges in this regard

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 36. Croatian: “Hrvati su odlučili da jedu svoj *kruh*, Srbi svoj *hleb*, a Bosanci svoj *hljeb*. Riječ *smrt* bila je na sva tri jezika ista” (46).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 71-4; *Ministarstvo*, 82-5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 75. Croatian: “Jugoslavija je bila strašna zemlja. U njoj su svi lagali, ko što lažu i danas. Samo što se sada jedna laž podelila na pet delova” (85).

is the relationship between personal biography, official history, and what Ugrešić in a 2005 essay signalled as a third history; an alternative, “intimate history of the everyday.”<sup>40</sup> For local opponents of *Jugonostalgija* and *Ostalgie*, the “common corpus of emotional landmarks”<sup>41</sup> Tanja and her students assemble represents selective amnesia and “history without guilt.”<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, for many (western) anti-capitalist warriors, all Ostalgias are simply variants of the to-be-condemned “commodity nostalgia” ubiquitous in capitalist societies. However, as Anna Saunders notes with reference to the former GDR, the planned economy’s shortages (*Mangelwirtschaft*) and lack of competition ensured that the same goods remained in production across decades. And while goods may have been of poor quality—the Trabant being a paradigmatic example—waiting times (rather than lack of purchasing power—people generally had enough money, there was just little to spend it on) forced people to take good care of whatever they did manage to purchase. In this respect, these specifically eastern consumption patterns, vastly different to western understandings of the design cycle and disposability, meant eastern products became “important sites of intimacy,”<sup>43</sup> antechambers to individual and shared memories.

Economic arguments aside, there is a more prosaic reason for differentiating “commodity Ostalgia” from its western equivalents. The “eternal return” principle on which capitalist design, fashion, and popular culture have functioned for almost half a century means that western consumers are able to

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<sup>40</sup> See Ugrešić, *Nobody’s Home*, 27-29; *Nikog nema doma*, 29-31.

<sup>41</sup> Boym, *Nostalgia*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 688; quoted in Boym, *Nostalgia*, xiv.

<sup>43</sup> Saunders, “*Ostalgie*,” 91.

freely indulge their “retro” desires. Few consumer objects, let alone movies, music, or television shows actually ever fall into oblivion, and fewer still are ever explicitly or tacitly proscribed. A ‘50s-style radio (iPod compatible), a ‘60s-shaped Vespa scooter (now a 4-stroke with disc brakes), and a ‘70s-cut leather jacket can be purchased almost globally, the ubiquity of these “nostalgic” items naturalising any subversive potential. For someone of my age, getting drunk and singing a karaoke “Summer of ‘69” while wearing a *Dukes of Hazzard* t-shirt might be in bad taste, but few people would deny the perpetrator the right to whatever memories he or she associates with the two. Moreover, the performance is unlikely to even be considered nostalgic. Doing the same with the emblematic remnants of a vanished state automatically changes the context. While the odd Simson *Schwalbe* scooter is still rattling around Berlin streets and the Zastava 750 (affectionately known as a *Fićo*) can occasionally be seen pattering along the Dalmatian coast, “nostalgic” consumer goods in both the former East Germany and former Yugoslavia tend to either be collectors’ items or ironic souvenirs for tourists.<sup>44</sup>

The convalescents’ game in *The Ministry of Pain* ceases following a euphoric end-of-semester session of singing, drinking, and remembering when Uroš gives a drunken recital of Desanka Maksimović’s poem, “Krvava bajka” (“A Bloody Fairytale”) and smashes his head on broken glass.<sup>45</sup> As Uroš recites the poem, Tanja calls to mind televised pictures of an elderly Maksimović sitting in the

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<sup>44</sup> The Internet has facilitated commerce in the various ostalgias, key sites being <http://www.kost-the-ost.de/> and <http://www.yu4you.com/>, the former, like the ex-Yugoslav orientated <http://www.leksikon-yu-mitologije.net/> also functions as a kind of “memory board” for former East Germans.

<sup>45</sup> The poem recounts a real incident in which German troops executed an entire class of school children in the Serbian town of Kragujevac in 1941 in an act of reprisal for a Partisan attack.

front row of a gathering where Slobodan Milošević is rallying the Serbs to war. As Tanja notes, Uroš's ignorance of the poem's trajectory from a canonized anti-war poem to a symbolic blessing of the Serbian nationalist war effort of the 1990s "pricked the protective balloon that was holding us together, and our collective nostalgia whooshed out and disappeared."<sup>46</sup> Following his death, Tanja thinks of Uroš as one of the wars' "collateral suicides," ghosts not entered in the record of the war dead, those who died quietly and anonymously of "humiliation, despair, fear, loneliness, and shame,"<sup>47</sup> and worries that the games of nostalgia were the trigger she not only supplied, but also pulled.

Given that "the house was in ruins," Tanja was always aware that any path cleared through them would sooner or later encounter a mine, the first of which is detonated by Selim's asking whether Omarska, the Bosnian Serb-run concentration camp where his father was murdered, could also be packed into the metaphorical suitcase. As Tanja acknowledges:

I realized I was walking a tightrope: stimulating memory was as much a manipulation of the past as banning it. The authorities in our former countries had pressed the *delete* button, I the *restore* button; they were erasing the Yugoslav past, blaming Yugoslavia for every misfortune, including the war, I reviving that past in the form of the everyday minutiae that had made up our lives, operating a volunteer lost-and-found service, if you will.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 88. Croatian: "Uroš je probio zaštitni balon koji se stvorio oko nas, i topla para kolektivne nostalgije nestala je" (100).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 127. Croatian: "Ubijali su se od poniženja, od očajanja, od straha, od samoće, od stida" (143).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 52. Croatian: "Znala sam da hodam po oštrici noža. Jer poticanje sjećanja bilo je svojevrсна manipulacija prošlošću, baš kao i njegova zabrana. Vlasti u našoj bivšoj zemlji pritiskale su tipku delete, a ja tipku restore. Tamo su vlasti manipulirale milijunima, a ja, ovdje, s njih nekoliko. Oni su brisali jugoslavensku prošlost, pripisujući jugoslavenstvu krivicu za sve nesreće, uključujući i sam rat, a ja sam brinula za svakidašnjicu koja je činila naše živote i osnivala volontersku lost&found službu." (64-5).

This dialectic of remembering and forgetting is brought to a head in the novel's climactic scene in which Igor accuses Tanja of having tortured her students by forcing them to remember a life they only wanted to forget. He claims that unlike her, her students have found ways to love Holland, for

“[f]lat, wet, nondescript as it is, Holland has one unique feature: it's a country of forgetting, a country without pain. People turn into amphibians here. Of their own accord. They turn the color of sand; they blend in and die out. Like fucking amphibians. That's all they care about: dying out. The Dutch lowlands are one big blotter, it sucks up everything—memories, pain, *all that crap* . . .”<sup>49</sup>

Defending the virtues of forgetting, Igor, in near ruins, tells Tanja exactly what he remembers of Yugoslavia:

“[W]hat I remember about that former country is that the local motherfuckers wanted to put me in a uniform and pack me off to war! To safeguard the achievements of their fucking country. What fucking country? The whole kit and caboodle was mine. You know the song: 'From Vardar in the South to the Triglav in the North . . .’”<sup>50</sup>

He accuses her of lacking empathy, of never having tried to imagine herself in a window of the red-light district, cleaning toilets like Selim, or keeping old Dutch men company like Meliha. He maintains that her students, having learnt “the skill of *humiliation*,” don't have any big ideas about themselves, and that they

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 207. Croatian: “Ovakva ravna, vlažna i nikakva, Holandija ipak ima nešto što druge zemlje nemaju. Ovo je zemlja zaborava, zemlja bez boli. Ovdje se ljudi svojom voljom pretvaraju u vodozemce, mimikriraju se u boju pijeska i tako umiru, kao fucking vodozemci. I ne žele ništa drugo nego da zamru. A holandska ravnica je kao dobra, stara bugačica, upija sve. Sjećanja, bol, sav taj crap” (250).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 209. Croatian: “A što se mene tiče, ja se iz te bivše zemlje sjećam toga da su mi domaći motherfuckersi htjeli navući na glavu vojničku košulju i poslati me u rat! Kao, da branim tekovine svoje fucking-domovine! Koje fucking-domovine?! Pa cijela je bila moja, od Vardara do Triglava...” (252-3).



had only played along with her archaeological “clear[ing] a path through the rubble,” like “the way Papuans made up cannibalist myths to indulge the anthropologists.”<sup>51</sup> He reminds Tanja of exactly what it is she possesses: an apartment in which someone else lives, a husband who has left her for Japan, books which are no longer “hers,” and a doctorate that is as good as worthless, explaining:

“The Schwarzenegger jaw—we all have it. Murderers, crooks, innocents, victims, survivors, refugees, the old folks at home and the new folks here—we’ve changed. The lot of us. It’s the war that did it, that fucked us up. Nobody comes out of a war unscathed. Nobody who’s sane. And you looked so shiny and bright. Like a porcelain teacup. Of course I wanted to break you, smash you, knock something out of you. A shred of sympathy, a flicker of compassion, anything . . .”<sup>52</sup>

#### 4.5 In the Ruins of Language

If we take Humboldt’s famous declaration that, “Die wahre Heimat ist eigentlich die Sprache,”<sup>53</sup> then Tanja and her students are truly homeless. Their mother tongue has become a foreign language, one unable to provide signifiers for their changed reality, let alone for its own name and the country where it was once spoken.<sup>54</sup> The students speak the names Croatia and Bosnia with caution, the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 207. Croatian: “Kao Papuanci koji su izmislili kanibalističke mitove da bi plizirali antropologe” (250).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 211-12. Croatian: “Svi mi hodamo po svijetu sa stisnutim vilicama, kao Schwarzenegger! Ubojice, krimosi, nedužni ljudi, žrtve, preživjeli, izbjeglice, oni doma, mi ovdje – svi mi više nismo isti ljudi. Sve nas je sjebao taj rat! Na ovaj ili onaj način. Nitko normalan ne izlazi iz rata bez oštećenja! A vi ste mi se nešto učinili bijelom i cijelom, ko porculanska šalica. Pa mi je prirodno došlo da vas slupam. Da vas razbijem. Da nešto izbijem iz vas. Neki mig sućuti, spazam milosrđa na licu nešto...” (255-56).

<sup>53</sup> Trans: One’s true homeland is in fact language.

<sup>54</sup> The disintegration of Yugoslavia perhaps unsurprisingly led to the disintegration of “Serbo-Croatian” (or “Croato-Serbian” as it was known in Croatia), the name of the language spoken as a mother tongue by Yugoslavia’s Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Montenegrins. While over the past two decades concerted efforts have been made to create distinct titular languages

word Yugoslavia under strain, and use the neutral pronoun *naš* (literally “our” or “ours”) to refer to their former country, *naški* or *naš jezik* (“our language”) to refer to “Serbo-Croatian,” and either *naši* (“our people”) or the nicknames *Jugovići* and *Jugosi* to refer to the former citizens of the now non-existent country. Tanja notes that surrounded by Dutch, communicating in English, and with one’s mother tongue broken into three, being in Holland was like learning to speak all over again, like a participant in a Croatian for Foreigners’ course.

In spite of these difficulties, Tanja and her students find nuances in their common language—their calling her *drugarice* (“comrade”) her calling them *đaci* (“pupils”) the strangled pronunciation of the greeting *zdravo* (“hello”)—which offer access to a common topography. Publicly combative in her defiance of the political death of “Serbo-Croatian,” Tanja tells her students that with lexical differences of some fifty words, Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian are variants of the same language. Reworking the somewhat tired expression that “every language is a dialect backed by an army” into a suggestion that Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian are backed by paramilitary groups, she rhetorically asks whether it is right to take language advice from semi-literate thugs. Privately however, she concedes that real armies stand behind the new languages, and that in these new

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(particularly in the case of Croatian), most serious linguists agree that the official “existence” of distinctly Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin languages is more a political than a linguistic fact. The four “new” languages remain mutually intelligible, with only minor variations in vocabulary and grammatical structure, and the difference that many (but by no means all) Serbs and Montenegrins write in the Cyrillic script. The naming of the Bosnian language is particularly contentious as the majority of Serbs and Croats living in Bosnia are adamant that they speak Serbian and Croatian respectively. In this sense, “Bosnian” is generally only spoken by Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks). For a reliable account of the history of Serbo-Croatian language policy and planning see Robert Greenberg, *Language and Identity in the Balkans: Serbo-Croatian and Its Disintegration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Also see Croatian linguist Snježana Kordić’s more recent *Jezik i nacionalizam* (Zagreb: Durieux, 2010), which created an uproar in nationalist Croatian circles given its (compellingly argued and exemplified) thesis that, at least linguistically, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin, are indeed a single language.

languages people butchered and raped their way around the former Yugoslavia. She likewise acknowledges that “Serbo-Croatian” also had its political function, had been backed by an army, and had been “polluted” by the forced introduction of Yugoslavisms. However, at least in this particular dialectic, she is clear that this process of language unification, having occurred over a much longer period of time, had been much better thought out than the “short history of divorce.” She is equally clear that the Yugoslav history of building bridges and roads had involved much more planning “than the short history of their destruction.”<sup>55</sup>

In spite of Tanja’s best efforts to defuse the potential bomb of language, Selim (a Bosnian Muslim) is irritated by the distinctly Serbian speech of Boban, an ex-Belgrader, and in retaliation plays up the Bosnian features of his own speech. The antipathy between Tanja and the mysterious Laki, whose pet project is creating a new Dutch-Croatian dictionary, is kicked off by Laki’s fondness for the Croatian newspeak. The bourgeois Croatian of Tanja’s acquaintance, Ines, is perfectly pitched to voice her casual racist asides and to rebuke Tanja for her naivety about the new linguistic reality—a reality her Dutch husband, Cees, as the Head of Slavic Studies, is keen to make real with his proposal to the Dutch Ministry of Education for the separate study of Croatian and Serbian. As Tanja notes at one point, “the hue and cry back home over the ‘national substance’ of language was both a pack of lies and the gospel truth.”<sup>56</sup> At home, speedy adoption of the newspeak used by newspapers and television was either a public pledge of national loyalty, or—with it being easier to participate in a lie in a

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<sup>55</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 36. Croatian: “od kratke povijesti njihova uništenja.”

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. Croatian: “Pokazalo se da je cijela ta domaća nacionalistička dreka oko ‘nacionalne supstance’ jezika laž, ali istobno i istina” (51).

language that is not one's own—the only means to describe one's experience of the unfolding nightmare.

#### 4.6 In the Ruins of Literature

Like *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and in keeping with Ugrešić's Yugoslav-era metafiction, the original Croatian edition of *The Ministry of Pain* is a novel deeply concerned with literature itself. Ugrešić prefaces many sections and chapters of the novel with illustrative citations from works by other Yugoslav writers and poets (Ivo Andrić, A.G. Matoš, Veljko Petrović, Ferida Duraković, Neno Mujčinović); poetry and prose by Marina Tsvetaeva, Wisława Szymborska, Joseph Brodsky, and Cees Nooteboom; as well as excerpts from the Yugoslav Pioneer's oath, an old Yugoslav primer, Peter Tosh's "Steppin' Razor," and Lewis Carroll's "Humpty Dumpty." Marina's Tsvetaeva's poem "Homesickness," with which the novel opens, brings the aporia of *Heimkehr* (the final third in Böll's thematic triptych of *Trümmerliteratur*) into central focus, and frames the novel's many other references to the subject. Tsvetaeva's narrator, numb and adrift in exile "like a Kamchatka bear with no ice floe," suggests her impossible homeland as the centre of her pain, but that, paradoxically, hope of return dies last.<sup>57</sup>

When a revised edition of *The Ministry of Pain* was published in Belgrade in 2009, Tsvetaeva's poem was the only surviving prefatory citation. Moreover, following the model set out by the (sixteen and counting) translated versions of the novel, the new revised Croatian edition, with the exception of a few

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<sup>57</sup> For Tsvetaeva "return" from exile in Prague, Berlin, and Paris did equal death. She hung herself in distant Yelabuga in 1941.

paragraphs, likewise omits a 25-page chapter containing a “lecture” by Meliha on selected Yugoslav “books of return,” replacing it with a four-page chapter containing largely disconnected reflections on the losses of exile, which does not appear in the original novel.<sup>58</sup> In a final twist, much of the material from the deleted chapter recently reappeared, reshaped in non-fictional form in an essay entitled “Duh kakanijske provincije” (“The Spirit of the Kakanian Province”).<sup>59</sup> What follows is an overview of the missing content.

As Tanja suggests, the Yugoslav “literary heroes” Meliha presents are distant descendants of Goethe’s Werther and Byron’s Childe Harold, close relatives of the Russian “superfluous men” canonized by Turgenev. The story of the educated, oversensitive, alienated individual unable to “adapt” to a home milieu, which either ignores or excludes him, seems to indicate a genetic pattern stretched out over a century-long soap opera.<sup>60</sup> The title characters of the first two novels *Janko Borislavić* (1887) and *Radmilović* (1894) by Ksavor Šandor Gjalski both suffer nervous breakdowns. The first, a peripatetic nobleman disappointed by the “rotteness” of existence both at home and abroad slits his wrists and dies, while the second, a poet celebrated abroad but savaged by the Zagreb literati, perishes in a mental asylum. Vjenceslav Novak’s *Dva svijeta* (1901, Two worlds) takes up similar themes—“the border between the two

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<sup>58</sup> A publication note to the English translation simply states that “[r]evisions to the Croatian edition of *Ministarstvo boli* originate with the author.” A number of the citations prefacing individual parts and chapters of the original novel are also missing.

<sup>59</sup> See Ugrešić, *Napad na minibar/Karaoke Culture*.

<sup>60</sup> As Tanja notes, female characters in these same novels perform three possible roles: that of the beautiful young patriot, who, as a general rule, is left by the hero; the femme fatale who simultaneously teases and inspires the hero; and the silent martyr who stands by her man until death does them part (*Ministry*; 169, *Ministarstvo*; 192).

worlds, home and away; destructive local milieux and the gifted individual.”<sup>61</sup> The novel’s hero, Amadej Zlatanić, a composer and graduate of the Prague Conservatory, returns to Croatia to have his compositions, which were feted in Prague, ridiculed in Zagreb. Losing his humble position as a chapel master to a tamburica player whose music has more appeal to provincial tastes, Zlatanić is eventually forced to sell his compositions, together with his authorial rights, to a Berlin publisher. Following the death of his first love Adelka (whom he has betrayed along the way), he also ends up in an asylum. In Novak’s second novel *Tito Dorčić* (1906) a fisherman father sends his apathetic son, the title character, to study law in Vienna. With the help of his father’s bribes the son manages to graduate but his incompetence is soon exposed when he sentences an innocent man to death. Tito Dorčić, too, goes mad and drowns in the sea, the very place he had never wanted to leave.

In Milutin Cihlar Nehajev’s *Bijeg* (1909, *Escape*) the hero, an aspiring writer is forced to take a job in a small Adriatic school. Abandoned by his girlfriend who has given up waiting for his proposal, he starts drinking, gets into increasing debt and ever more frequent quarrels, loses his job, and, like his literary cousin, Tito Dorčić, drowns. In Miroslav Krleža’s *Povratak Filipa Latinovicza* (1932, *The Return of Phillip Latinowicz*), the title character returns from the “decadence” of Paris to the “purity” of his Pannonian hometown after a 23-year absence, but instead of respite and convalescence from existential torment, Filip lands in a world of bourgeois lies, false moralism, and hypocrisy.

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<sup>61</sup> Original: Granice između dva svijeta, domovine i tuđine; destruktivne lokalne sredine i nadarenog pojedinca (196).

In the aforementioned essay “The Spirit of the Kakanian Province,” Ugrešić fashions the sketches of these novels into a series of reflections on the relationship between centre and periphery, the Kakanian (*kaiserlich und königlich*) centre being Vienna, the periphery, Zagreb and the Croatian provinces. Each novelistic example contains “the same web of motives about the dislocation of the intelligent individual from the environment and his state of forever being torn between provinces and metropolises. The hero’s choice always favors a return to the homeland, the periphery, the provinces.”<sup>62</sup> Yet this periphery is one that “devours its young.” Ugrešić continues: “The centre is inclusive, the periphery exclusive; the centre communicates, the periphery excommunicates; the centre is multi-national, the periphery mono-national; the centre is like a sponge, the periphery like a stone.”<sup>63</sup> Taken together, it is difficult not to see a kind of metatextual collage in Ugrešić’s gathering of these novels, a letter sent home from abroad to the Croatian province, reminding its residents that the theme of the gifted individual rejected by his or her milieu is a also cultural text to which new chapters are constantly being added.

Fast-forwarding a half-century, the final two novels in Meliha’s lecture, Milovan Danojlić’s *Dragi moj, Petroviću* (1986, *My dear Petrović*) and Dragoslav Mihailović’s *Kad su cvetale tikve* (1983, *When Pumpkins Blossomed*)<sup>64</sup> likewise treat the subject of return, but most significantly, appear to prove Ugrešić’s often

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<sup>62</sup> Ugrešić, *Karaoke Culture*, 285. Croatian: “isti splet motiva o iščašenosti inteligentnog pojedinca iz sredine i njegovu stalnu rastrzanost između provincije i metropole. Junakov izbor uvijek pada na povratak u domovinu, na periferiju, u provinciju” (279).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 292. Croatian: “Centar je inkluzivan, periferija je ekskluzivna, centar je komunikativan, periferija je ekskomunikativna, centar je multinacionalan, periferija je mononacionalna, centar je spužva, periferija je kamen” (287).

<sup>64</sup> This is the only novel Ugrešić omits from the essay “The Spirit of the Kakanian Province.”

articulated belief in reverse mimesis, of life imitating art. The crucial importance of their inclusion in *The Ministry of Pain*—and their equally crucial omission from the novel’s second Croatian edition—is that, read retrospectively, both contain terrifying prophecies of the wars of the 1990s.

Danojlić’s epistolary novel consists of ten letters sent by Mihajlo Putnik to his friend Steve Petrovich, an émigré in Cleveland who is considering a return to Serbia. Putnik’s letters provide a devastating analysis of the traditions and customs of Serbian provincial life. In portrayals of the lives of people whose shirts are “dirty with misfortune,” Putnik describes life in the metonymic town of “Kopanja” (etymologically, a wooden pig’s trough), where, derelict and catatonic, “a wasteland enters through one door and boredom steals out the other.”<sup>65</sup> He warns his friend of the pointlessness of returning home to discover anew exactly what forced him to leave in the first place. In a litany of observations too numerous to adequately summarize here, Putnik savages his countrymen for an arrogance born of repressed knowledge of their unimportance, for their funerals and weddings that go on for days, for their pride in the “acrobatics of spitting into the wind,” for stealing table condiments and toilet paper, their suspicion of everyone and everything (“they’ll be dying of hunger but still won’t try anything they haven’t already eaten”<sup>66</sup>), their obsession with avoiding the cold and fresh air, and their fierce determination to work as little as possible. Putnik records their servility—“the common man is always on the side of whoever is holding a baton”—their terrifying ability to

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<sup>65</sup> Serbian: “Na jedna vrata ulazi pustoš, na druga se iskrada dosada” (209).

<sup>66</sup> Serbian: “Skapaće od gladi a neće okusiti ono što dotle nije jeo” (211).



reconcile themselves to anything, their still more terrifying ability to hate—  
“Nothing will save you. Not a single public success, no honour, no riches or fame,  
nothing will give you safe refuge”<sup>67</sup>—and their prestigious ability to hold  
grudges—“They have long memories, they can wait a hundred years to get their  
own back. And they take their revenge on the innocent, simply to give vent to the  
evil inside.”<sup>68</sup>

Recalling Ugrešić’s earlier definition of the postsocialist *Trümmerleute* who “feel  
most natural in an aeroplane” and Tanja’s declaration that she feels best “in the  
air,” Putnik also articulates a preference for an “in-between” space:

“It’s hard there, and it’s hard here, but it’s hardest of all with oneself . . . As  
far as I’m concerned, I wish I could be in several places at once, here and  
there, on native and foreign soil, in abundance and poverty, in freedom  
and constraint, and to just move through it all simultaneously, trying one  
thing while gauging its opposite; to be with your people (because you love  
them) and yet far away (because they’re a pain in the neck), to serve and  
be served, to have and have not, to never only be in one place, with a  
single, final choice.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Serbian: “Ništa te neće spasti. Nijedan javni uspeh, nikakva počast, ni bogatstvo ni slava, neće ti dati siguran zaklon” (212). This is of course an echo of the experience Goran’s father describes in his memoirs.

<sup>68</sup> Serbian: “Dugo pamte, čekaju da vrate milo za drago, po sto godina love priliku. Svete se i nedužnima, samo da bi zlo iz sebe izbili” (212).

<sup>69</sup> Serbian: “Teško je tamo, teško je ovde, najteže je sa samim sobom . . . Što se mene tiče, najbolje bi bilo kad bih mogao, istovremeno, stajati na mnogim mestima, biti ovde i tamo, na rodnom tlu i u tuđini, u obilju i siromaštvu, slobodi i stezi, kroz sve to, u istom času, prolaziti, i iskušavajući jedno procenjivati ono što mu je suprotno; biti u svom narodu (jer ga voliš) i opet vrlo daleko od njega (jer ti je mučan), služiti i biti služben, imati i nemati, nikad samo na jednom mestu, s jednim, konačnim izborom” (210).

Danojlić's novel also contains a chilling premonition: complaining about the lethargy and inertia of Kopanja's inhabitants, Putnik writes to his friend that "[a]nyone wanting to wake us up is going to have to start a war."<sup>70</sup>

A retrospective reading of Dragoslav Mihailović's short novel *When Pumpkins Blossomed* contains similarly terrifying premonitions of bloodshed to come. Although written in the late 1960s, the novel, touching on the taboo subject of Goli otok did not appear until 1983, following Tito's death.<sup>71</sup> Mihailović's anti-hero, Ljuba Šampion (his surname a transliteration of "champion"), a former small-time boxing champion, tells the story of a misspent youth in post-WWII Belgrade, the suicide of his 17-year-old sister following her rape by a local gangster, his murder of the gangster and subsequent flight abroad. Happily married in Sweden, Ljuba sometimes goes mad, gets drunk, gets in the car and drives south, stopping somewhere in Slovenia—not daring to go further. He then fills the petrol tank, returns across the Austrian border, stops somewhere, syphons a handful of petrol and rubs it on his face, through his hair, and on his chest, this baptismal ritual a symbolic encounter with his estranged homeland. Although the novel begins with the sentence "Ne, neću se vratiti" ("No, I won't return"), like the narrator of Tsvetaeva's "Homesickness," Ljuba never gives up on the idea of return, declaring

"[t]here's really only one remaining hope for me, and it's a pretty dark one: that someday a smart little war will break out. Because if it comes to

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<sup>70</sup> Serbian: "Ko bi hteo da nas probudi morao bi nam objaviti rat" (214).

<sup>71</sup> A 1968 theatrical adaptation by the Jugoslovensko dramsko pozorište (Yugoslav Dramatic Theatre) in Belgrade was banned immediately after opening, the scandal becoming one of the most famous cultural controversies in the former Yugoslavia. An English translation of the novel was published in 1971 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovic.

that, they'll call me for sure, and clean and clear I'll be able to return. But you know, today there aren't even any smart wars in this stupid world."<sup>72</sup>

In what can be understood as a deft reference to Dragoslav Mihailović himself, Ana notes that the wars of the 1990s woke not only Yugoslav literary heroes, but also their authors. Mihailović joined a shamefully long list of Serbian writers, including Desanka Maksimović, Dobrica Ćosić, Momo Kapor, and Vuk Drašković, who supported Slobodan Milošević's Greater Serbian enterprise. The nationalist bugle call awoke the residents of the metonymical "Kopanja" (grunting at their troughs), and brought back all the real-life Serbian and Croatian Ljuba Šampions.<sup>73</sup> As Ana reasons it:

"Hatred is patriotism's other face . . . And that's why a war is needed. So they can 'legally' avenge that chimera, the 'homeland' . . . To avenge it because they left, for their misfortune, to avenge it for a betrayal, for an insult they've had to bear . . . And war is an opportunity to disguise things. In wartime everything is understood differently, murder is heroism, destruction a strategic necessity, revenge the defence of dignity."<sup>74</sup>

With these family portraits offering literary refractions and a kind of

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<sup>72</sup> Serbian: "I otada mi u stvari ostade još samo jedna, dosta mračna nada da će najzad izbiti neki mali, pametan rat. Jer dođe li do toga, tada će me sigurno pozvati i ja ću čist i bez potrebe da se perem, mirno moći da se vratim. Ali kad danas, evo, u ovom glupom svetu nema više ni pametnih ratova."

<sup>73</sup> Most notably, these real life Ljuba Šampions included the Serbian warlord and career criminal Željko Raznatović (better known by his *nom de guerre*, Arkan) and his fellow ex-French foreign legionnaire, Ante Gotovina, who quickly rose to the rank of General in the Croatian Army. Raznatović was executed in a mafia-style killing in Belgrade in 2000, and after several years on the run, Gotovina was in 2005 finally arrested by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and in 2011 sentenced to 24 years in prison for his command role in the ethnic cleansing of the Serbian population from the Krajina.

<sup>74</sup> Croatian: "Mržnja jeste drugo lice patriotizma. To se osjeća kod Mihajla Putnik i Ljube Šampiona. I zato je potreban rat. Da bi mogli 'legalno' da kazne tu himeru, 'tu domovinu' . . . Da je kazne za mnoge stvari . . . Za svoju nesreću, da je kazne zato što su otišli, da je kazne za neku prevaru, za neku uvredu koja im je nanescena . . . A rat je prilika da se stvari maskiraju. U ratu se sve čita drugačije, ubojstvo je herojstvo, rušilaštvo je strateška nužnost, osveta je obrana dostojanstva" (215).

metacommentary on so many of the novel's central concerns (the same role that intertexts and ekphrasis played in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*), their elision from both the translations and the revised version of the novel partially strips the work of its considerable literariness. Yet one must perhaps also be frank and concede that only those who read both the first Croatian edition of the novel and the revised version are really any the wiser. For those reading in translation or first reading the revised edition, what they encounter is a singular, complete text—and not a single Anglo-American, French, or German reviewer appeared aware of the changes. Finally, authors revising their work over time are certainly not an unusual phenomenon, the obvious example is again Kundera, a serial reviser, and a writer keenly aware of the multiple addressees for his work. I asked Ugrešić for her comment on the revisions and she responded in the following terms:

*The fact is that my writings change not only from translation to translation, but also from edition to edition. I don't think the changes are major, and likewise, I don't feel that once published, whatever I've written is then forever sacrosanct. So how and why the changes? Good translators usually comment on the text. I value such translators: their active relationship with my writing gives me a general confidence in their work.*

*With regard to *The Ministry of Pain*, there was some disagreement about the seventh chapter of Part Three of the novel. In the first edition there is a rather comprehensive lecture given by a student named Meliha on the theme of the protagonist's return to the homeland, and how the theme developed in the Croatian and Serbian novel from the nineteenth century to the present day. The translator into English, Michael Heim, believed the chapter invaluable to the understanding of the novel, while the German and a number of other translators found it hard going and felt it would drag for their local readers. In the end I decided to heed the advice of the majority. I removed the original chapter and wrote a new, shorter one, which, in my view, works better in the scheme of the novel.*

*In the course of the translation of the novel, Michael Heim and I were in frequent correspondence. He was uneasy about the positioning of the Marina Tsvetaeva poem, which was placed at the beginning of the novel as a kind of motto, setting the narrative and thematic tone. I felt that opening with the poem was absolutely the way to go. Michael was of the view that*

*the poem should appear in the epilogue, and in the British edition that's where it appears. In the American edition it's at the beginning, as it is in the original. The American edition came out after the British edition. I simply couldn't get used to the idea of the poem being in the epilogue and not at the beginning as originally conceived. The change got to me much more than the omission of an entire chapter.*

*Since then a second Croatian language edition of *The Ministry of Pain* has come out. I took the opportunity to remove all the citations serving as mottos for individual chapters. While re-reading the novel in preparation for the second edition, it occurred to me that the citations were weighing the text down, and that although they were all in some way canonical, I wondered about their purpose. It was as if I had suddenly felt insecure, as if I was seeking reassurance that I wasn't alone and had felt the need to shore up my own position. That Tanja Lucić, the novel's narrator, was a teacher of literature, and thus it was entirely conceivable such a heroine would make use of literary citations was no longer a convincing enough reason to retain them. The citations had served as a kind of literary crutch—mine—not Tanja's.<sup>75</sup>*

To Meliha's suggestion that the novels belong not on shelves of *belles lettres*, but in a museum of terror and horror, Tanja responds with the brooding acknowledgement that she, a professor of literature, is its curator. The literary "family portraits" with which she has packed her students' metaphorical suitcases are simply approved forms of memory content, but essentially no different to the contraband detritus of the Yugoslav everyday. Yet irrespective of content or form, her classes have turned into "a cheap psycho-drama,"<sup>76</sup> and literature has merely provided a trustworthy alibi for "the amateur exorcism of anything and everything."<sup>77</sup> She concedes that everything she learnt about literature at university no longer applies, a realization echoing Meliha's earlier acknowledgement that the war had infantilized her literary tastes: the irony and artistic pretension she used to love has been replaced by the romantic justice of

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<sup>75</sup> Personal e-mail communication from Dubravka Ugrešić to David Williams, August 11, 2011. The original Croatian text of the e-mail is included as an appendix.

<sup>76</sup> Croatian: "pretvorili [se] u jeftinu psiho-dramu" (216).

<sup>77</sup> Croatian: "amatersko egzorciranje svega i svačega" (216).

fairytale. In this regard, Croatian cultural critic, Jurica Pavičić, would once half-joke that the Yugoslav wars changed the literary tastes of an entire generation—that those who went into the war as lovers of Borges, Barnes, and Ondaatje, came out of it as devotees of Raymond Carver, Flannery O'Connor, and Graham Greene.

The critical question provoked here—by Ugrešić in *The Ministry of Pain* in the first instance, and by Pavičić in the second—concerns the function of literature in situations of upheaval, revolution, and mass slaughter. Böll's declaration, that a good pair of eyes is essential to a writer's toolbox can, *inter alia*, be read as a defence of his own suspension of literary transposition in favour of realistic documentation. While Böll's position was based on admirable ethics—only clear-eyed depiction of the Second World War's destruction would have the required didactic effect—it nevertheless violated one of modernism's central tenets—that of Shklovsky's *Ostranenie*, or the defamiliarization or estrangement that separates art from non-art. However, as Yugoslav writers came to realise with the advent of war, the problem with *Ostranenie* was the severe lack of space left for the defamiliarising refractions of literary transposition when one's everyday life had suddenly become completely unfamiliar. In the Croatian context of the early nineties, Pavičić encapsulates the dilemma:

Literature with literature as its subject matter, literature that amuses itself in a mirrored hall of literary codes and intertexts suddenly becomes incredibly distasteful when one is stacking sand bags around one's house and taping one's windows with brown Sellotape. Material reality, which had until recently been conscientiously omitted from Croatian prose, came back through the window in the form of the adventure of everyday life. Frontlines, air raids and air raid shelters, refugeedom, broken marriages, evictions, and mass murder suddenly transformed everyone's life into the stuff of fiction. In that delirium no one, irrespective of political

orientation, cared about imagined fictional zones.<sup>78</sup>

In 1820, Heinrich Heine wrote the lines that would become one of his most famous epigraphs: “Das war ein Vorspiel nur, dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen”—“That was only a prelude; where they burn books, they ultimately burn people.” However, the flames of the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina in Sarajevo, deliberately targeted by Bosnian Serb mortars on an August night in 1992, were not a prelude: books and people had been burning for months. In the endgame confrontation between Igor and Tanja, Igor bitterly suggests these flames as the only honest starting point for Yugoslav literary and cultural history—a history of arson. Tanja’s real job should have been teaching “statistics and topographies of destruction”:

“Your course was about a culture that had totally compromised itself, and you neglected to mention that fact. Besides, you talked exclusively about the past: when you lectured on Andrić, you neglected to mention that the current cohort of culture butchers have chopped him in three and there’s now a Croatian and a Bosnian and a Serbian Andrić.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Pavičić, “Prošlo je vrijeme Sumatra i Javi,” 126. Croatian: “Književnost koja se bavi književnošću i uživa u dvorani zrcala literarnih kodova i interteksta postane vam najednom užasno nesimpatična u trenutku kad kuću oblažete vrećama pijeska, a prozore smeđim selotejpom. Materijalna stvarnost koja je do tog trenutka bila dosljedno izbačena iz hrvatske proze vratila se kroz prozor u obliku avanture svakodnevnog života. Bojište, podrumi, izbjeglištvo, avionski preleti, razvrgnuti brakovi, izbacivanja iz stanova i masovna umorstva najednom su svačiji život pretvorili u romaneskni štof. U tom deliriju stvarnosti nikome, ni lijevima ni desnima, nije više bilo do izmaštanih fikcionalnih zona.”

<sup>79</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 209. Croatian: “Predavali ste kulturu koja je iskompromitirala samu sebe, a propustili ste da to glasno i jasno kažete! Tupili ste o nečemu čega više nema. Dok ste govorili o Ivi Andriću, propustili ste reći da su ga domaći kulturni mesari rasjekli na tri dijela, na hrvatski, bosanski i srpski” (253).

With help from August Šenoa's *Branka*—whose title character, a young idealistic teacher from Zagreb, inspired by the Croatian national revival,<sup>80</sup> volunteers to teach at a remote village school where her mission is “the reform and ennoblement of the souls entrusted to her”<sup>81</sup>—Igor reminds Tanja that in hiding behind the institution of literature, she has failed in her duty of care. And as for stories of return, the only one that matters to Meliha is that of the Yugoslav *Gastarbeiter* who gave their working lives to western Europe, returned home to build enormous houses—monuments to years of foreign toil—only to see them reduced to the same ruins that forced them to make their lives abroad in the first place. Such a “literature of the ruins” exemplifies how every Yugoslav generation “starts with nothing and ends with nothing.”<sup>82</sup>

#### 4.7 In the Ruins of Home

Those who have written about *The Ministry of Pain* as a novel of the horrors of exile tend to elide the other half of Ugrešić's dialectic—home. In a 2009 interview, she explains the dilemma in the following terms:

Home and homeland, which in most people's mental framework are imbued with positive associations and romanticized pictures, can actually be traumas. But home and homeland as traumas, almost nobody talks about it, just as almost nobody dares crush the romantic myth of motherhood, for example. It's self-evident that both are near sacred concepts, which most people understand as last refuges, as myths to be left well alone, myths ill-suited to “deconstruction.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> A popular movement in the first half of the nineteenth century analogous to other national revivals throughout the Habsburg lands.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 200. Croatian: “prevrnuti i oplemeniti one duše koje su joj poverene” (242).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 170. Croatian: “Svaka generacija počinje od nule i završava na nuli” (208).

<sup>83</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, interview by Vladimir Arsenijević, *Novosti.com*, December 31, 2009 <http://www.novosti.com/2009/12/knjizevnica-dubravka-ugresic/> [accessed 3 August 2011]. Croatian: “Dom i domovina koji su u mentalnom sklopu većine ljudi obojani pozitivnim



In resigned descriptions of the secret wars she and her mother wage against each other, Tanja offers a stark deconstruction of the myth of home. As much as she struggles to locate internal and external coordinates in Amsterdam, doubly displaced, she faces the same problems in Zagreb, the city where she grew up. Her inability to find the office where she needs to apply for a new identification card brings out the “refugee trauma, the equivalent of the sudden disappearance of the mother from a child’s field of vision”<sup>84</sup>; a trauma that should only occur abroad now occurs at home.

Tanja’s visit home also prompts some of the novel’s strongest reflections on historical remembering and forgetting. Kundera famously wrote that “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting,”<sup>85</sup> and in these terms, *The Ministry of Pain* suggests that vis-à-vis the wars in the former Yugoslavia, this has been a struggle lost. For Aleš Debeljak, and for many other Yugoslav writers and intellectuals, the flames of Vukovar, Mostar, and Sarajevo were irrefutable evidence that Europe had learned nothing from the twentieth century, and that “the anti-fascist and anti-genocidal ‘never again’ that is supposedly a cornerstone of Europe’s political conscience has become nothing but an empty slogan repeated dutifully once a year.”<sup>86</sup> Such a sentiment is articulated in *The Ministry of Pain* when a fellow Croatian émigré advises Tanja that the sooner she forgets Zagreb’s old street names and learns the new ones,

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osjećajima i romantiziranim slikama mogu zapravo biti—trauma. O domu i domovini kao traumi malo tko govori, kao što se malo tko usuđuje da naruši romantičan mit majčinstva, na primjer. Očito je da se radi o gotovo religijskim obrascima, koje većina ljudi shvaća kao posljednje utočište, kao mit koji ne treba dirati, kao mit koji ne podliježe ‘dekonstrukciji.’”

<sup>84</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 117. Croatian: “Izbjeglička trauma, ona dječja panika izazvana naglim nestankom mame iz našega vidnog polja” (134).

<sup>85</sup> Kundera, *Laughter and Forgetting*, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Debeljak, *Twilight of the Idols*, 24.

the better. He insists that those who remained behind have written off all new émigrés, and that emigration lends time a different quality; the émigré's yesterday is ancient history for those who have remained. Twisting the knife on Debeljak's claim, he suggests that, "in a year or two nobody will remember Vukovar. Or Sarajevo for that matter. Not even the people who live there."<sup>87</sup> The drive towards forgetting is presented as part of an ineluctably human problem, in that "[p]eople have no bent for misfortune, believe me. They can't identify with mass disaster. Not for long, at least, and not even if the disaster is their own."<sup>88</sup>

Tanja's reading of Goran's father's memoirs provides further evidence to suggest that while *The Ministry of Pain* may be a novel concerned, *inter alia*, with Yugonostalgia, its representations of life in the former Yugoslavia are complex. Goran's father, whom Tanja calls Papa, refers to life after release from incarceration as a political prisoner in the concentration camp of Goli otok<sup>89</sup> as posthumous; stripped of his Partisan status and expelled from the Communist Party, he is a corpse "exiled from life." Tanja suggests that his memoir's addressee was "neither his future progeny nor Tito nor the Party nor the secret police nor the Yugoslav state nor the brutal Goli otok guards, it was the small town where he had taught."<sup>90</sup> She sees Goran, unable to recover from the insult

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<sup>87</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 119. Croatian: "za godinu dana više nitko [se] neće sjećati ni Vukovara niti Sarajeva. Ni sami Vukovarci ni sami Sarajlije" (135).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 120. Croatian: "Ljudi nisu kapacitirani za nesreću, kažem vam. Ljudi nisu u stanju da se identificiraju s masovnim nesrećama. Naprosto nisu sposobni da se trajnije vežu uz nesreću. Čak niti uz svoju vlastitu" (137).

<sup>89</sup> As Tanja surmises, Papa, a true believer in the brighter future of socialism, most likely ended up there for ill-considered remarks in support of Stalin at the time when Tito's Yugoslavia decided to pursue its own kind of *Sonderweg*.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. Croatian: "pravi Tatin adresat nisu ni njegovi budući unuci, ni Tito, ni Partija, ni Udba, ni jugoslavenska država, niti brutalni golootočki čuvari, nego provincijsko mjesto N" (149).

of losing his job and having to go abroad, as replicating his father's mistake—that of submitting every personal triumph to a homeland or hometown deaf to accomplishment and rejoicing only in the *Schadenfreude* of one's failure. The novels of Meliha's lecture again reinforce the point. These ruminations lead to Tanja's conclusion that perhaps Yugoslavia had only ever been a country inhabited by two groups of people: victims and victimizers who periodically changed places. In the context of post-independence Croatia, playwright Slobodan Šnajder wrote (in March 1994) that "the day will soon come when it will be difficult to find two Croats whose views on what actually happened here over the past three years are in complete accord."<sup>91</sup>

In American exile, contemplating the impossibility of return to his native Petersburg, Joseph Brodsky's Russian variation on "you can never go home again" was that one could never "step twice on the same asphalt."<sup>92</sup> The sentiment finds its more colourful reprise in *The Ministry of Pain* in Ines's reminder to Tanja that having left Zagreb, she will never be allowed to return, because "[y]ou fall between two stools, no matter how big a rump you've got."<sup>93</sup> Humour, however, is missing from the heartbreaking exchange between Tanja and Ana, who has decided to return to Belgrade. Asked what she expects to find at home, Ana replies, "one horror after another," and to the question of what she would have were she to remain in Amsterdam, Ana responds, "the absence of

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<sup>91</sup> Slobodan Šnajder, *Kardinalna greška* (Rijeka: Novi list, 1999), 24. Croatian: "doći će uskoro dan kad će biti teško naći dvojicu Hrvata čiji se sudovi potpuno poklapaju u pogledu toga što se kod nas u posljednje tri godine uistinu dogodilo."

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Boym, *Nostalgia*, 305.

<sup>93</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 161. Croatian: "Ne može čovjek sjediti na dve stolice, pa čak ni ako ima veliku *riticu*" (181). A further variant of the expression can be found in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in which a character (in relation to Heraclitus's riverbed) notes that "You can't step twice into the same river" (88).

horrors.”<sup>94</sup> (Later we learn that Ana’s return will mean her death in the 1999 NATO bombing of Belgrade.) This sense of being in a clearing, of having “the awful feeling that there’s no one behind you and no one in front of you”<sup>95</sup> as Ana puts it, or having “a wasteland behind me and nothing in front of me”<sup>96</sup> as Tanja rephrases it, is given its most forceful retelling in Igor’s interpretation of Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić’s fairy tale “Kako je Potjeh tražio istinu” (“How Potjeh Sought the Truth”). The moral, as Igor sets it out, is that remaining in exile equals defeat, return equals symbolic or real death, and that “the only triumph of human freedom resides in the ironic split second of our departure.”<sup>97</sup> Whether it is Tsvetaeva’s narrator in “Homesickness,” the “superfluous men” of Yugoslav literature, or Tanja and her students, this bleakness beyond bleakness is constantly reiterated in *The Ministry of Pain*. In several refractions towards the end of novel, Tanja establishes the problem:

My students appear to have missed the boat, as have I, for that matter, but only by a second. We stood there with our mouths open for a second too long and missed our chance to enter the new age. All we can do now is run our legs off to keep in place. The loser bug has made its way into our hearts and weakened the muscles there.<sup>98</sup>

Outflanked by history, Tanja and her students’ transmission into Europe’s new time has failed. For them, as for Kundera’s Tomáš and Tereza, returning home

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<sup>94</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 179. Croatian. “Užas”; “Izostanak užasa” (221).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “onaj gadan osjećaj da iza vas nema nikoga i da ispred vas nema nikoga” (220).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 184. Croatian: “Iza mene zjapila je pustoš, ispred mene nije bilo ničega” (226).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 182. Croatian: “jedini trijumf ljudske slobode sadržan u onoj ironičnoj sekundi odlaska” (224).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 237. Croatian: “Moji studenti su, čini se, zakasnili, kao što sam i ja zakasnila, zakasnili smo za sekundu, za samo jednu sekundu. Zagledali samo se, zablenu, propustili da kliznemo u novo vrijeme. Nama je preostalo da trčimo iz sve snage da bismo ostali na mjestu. Virus gubitništva već je penetrirao u naša srca i oslabio naše srčane mišiće” (283).

will equal death, remaining in exile defeat, and the ironic split second of departure their only moment of triumph.

#### 4.8 An Eastern Sadness

As *The Ministry of Pain* draws to a close, Ugrešić inserts two extended essayistic passages that challenge not only the possibility of East-West rapprochement, but also the terms of any such *entente*. While Tanja remains the implied narrator of both passages, the first in particular reads as if narrated by a new, different voice. It begins:

We are barbarians. The members of our tribe bear the invisible stamp of Columbus on their foreheads. We travel west and end up east; indeed, the farther west we go the farther east we get. Our tribe is cursed.

We settle on the outskirts of cities. We choose them so we can gather up our tents when the time comes and set off again, move farther west to get farther east. We live in gray, crowded, cheaply constructed prefabs that encircle the city center like keys on a castellan's ring. Some people call them ghettos.<sup>99</sup>

In these ghettos, satellite dishes sprout from every balcony, the embodiment of their owners' love-hate relationship with homelands they, like Columbus, are never really able to leave behind. The barbarian settlements are off limits to all but accidental tourists, and the police leave residents alone to the screams of

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 225. Croatian: "Mi smo barbari. Ljudi našeg plemena nose na čelima nevidljivi žig Columbove zablude. Mi putujemo zapadno i uvijek stižemo istočno, i što smo zašli zapadnije, to smo stigli istočnije, naše je pleme proketo. Naseljavamo se na rubovima gradova. Biramo rubove kako bismo jednoga dana lakše mogli sklopiti svoje šatore i krenuti, ponovo krenuti na put, dublje prema zapadu, da bismo stigli dalje na istok. Živimo u sivim, mnogoljudnim stambenim zgradama jeftine gradnje, u sivim naseljima koja se nižu oko centra grada poput ključeva obješenih na metalnu kolutu što visi o pojasu gospodara zamka. Neki ta naselja zovu getima" (269).

their young men's knife fights, screams that "eat into us like acid."<sup>100</sup> The city's burghers never stray into the greyness, claiming they lack the requisite "low-life visa." For their part, the people of the fringes—"the false bottom of the perfect society"<sup>101</sup>—are rarely seen downtown, and so the division is entrenched, each side electing the safety of remaining among its own. Written in the first person plural, with its scattered references to mosques and prayer books, the "essay" underlines that while the Elbe may remain the most familiar East-West fault line, there exist other fault lines, further to the East. While reified East-West zones may have officially disappeared with the Wall, in the "cosmopolitan" cities of the continent's western and northern edge divisions clearly remain, inchoate and amorphous undoubtedly, but as strictly demarcated as ever nonetheless.

In the second embedded "essay" a narratorial voice more clearly identifiable as Tanja's offers what initially appears to be a human possibility for overcoming East and West—the impending arrival of a postcommunist new man, a "compatible player" wired for the new time. Fired in transition and minted with western doctorates, these new people will be

cosmopolitan, global, multicultural, nationalistic, ethnic and diasporic all at once . . . They will be the champions of democracy in these transitional times . . . the words *mobility* and *fluidity* will be like chewing gum in their mouths. They will be progressive and aggressively young, the well-paid commissars of *European integration and enlargement*, the harbingers of the new order, the creators of *unique postnational political units* . . . They will always write the word *Enlargement* with a capital *E*, because for them

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 227. Croatian: "krici naših sinova izjedaju kao kiselina" (271). Along with this image, the narrator depicts fish markets reeking of fish, butcher shops awash with blood, and the barbarian's fearsome ability to multiply in order to underline viscera as a defining "eastern" characteristic. See *Ministry*, 226; *Ministarstvo*, 270.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 226. Croatian: "duplo dno ovog savršenog društva" (271).

it heralds a new era, a new humanism, Renaissance and Enlightenment rolled into one.<sup>102</sup>

With Miłosz's "sediment of sarcasm" rising in her every new sentence, Tanja suggests that while this new class may have reason to celebrate communism's becoming water over the dam, their ability to swim in the new waters will be propelled by the millions of losers who, unable to find their feet, will drown:

But on their way they will forget that the *very* flexibility, mobility and fluidity that catapulted them to the surface leave a nameless mass of slaves down below. All through the gray backwaters people will be eking out precarious livings by manufacturing the goods the West European magnates call for . . . some of them will travel all the way to the shores of Western Europe, where the more fortunate will pick asparagus in Germany and tulips in Holland and the less fortunate will scrub toilets.<sup>103</sup>

In *The Ministry of Pain* the Barthesian *punctum* comes for Tanja while watching Philip Kaufmann's cinematic adaption of Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Seeing a close-up of a Russian soldier pointing his revolver at Juliette Binoche, who, playing Tereza, has been inserted into black and white documentary footage, Tanja feels the (never-fired) revolver's bullet metaphorically puncturing her skin and making the film's story her own.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 235-6. Croatian: "kozmpoliti, globalisti, multikulturisti, nacionalisti, predstavnici etničkih identiteta i disperzivnih dijasporičnih identiteta, sve u jednom . . . Bit će to novi borci za demokraciju u tranzicijskim uvjetima . . . bit će to ljudi koji će u ustima premetati riječi *mobility*, *flexibility*, i *fluidity* kao žvakaću gumu. Bit će to mladi progresivni ljudi, plaćeni komesari *European integration and enlargement process*, radnici na gradnji novoga poretka, specijalisti za *new, unique postnational political units*. . . Riječ *Enlargement* pisat će velikim početnim slovom, baš kao da se radi o novoj epohi, o humanizmu, renesansi i prosvjetiteljstvu" (280-2).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 237. Croatian: "Na svome putu zaboravit će da je ista ta *fleksibilnost, mobilnost* i *fluidnost*, koja je njih katapultirala na površinu, ostavila na dnu bezimeno ljudsko roblje. Po sivim provincijskim zakucima ljudi će zarađivati novčić izrađujući robu za zapadno-evropske industrijske magnate . . . Neki će iz svojih sivih provincijskih zakutaka dopuzati do obala Zapadne Evrope. Oni s više sreće brat će šparoge po njemačkim i tulipane po holandskim poljima, oni s manje sreće čistit će tuđa govna" (282-3).

Intellectually Tanja knows that the 1968 Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia is not *her* story—she was only six years old at the time—but emotionally everything has become jumbled. Occurring in the chance constellation of a certain moment with a certain emotional landscape, this *punctum*, mediated many times and finally “transmitted” and “translated” by Juliette Binoche, brings Tanja to tears:

Even though I felt the only story I had a proper copyright on was the “Yugoslav story,” at that moment all stories were mine. I wept in my innermost being over the imaginary tangled web that bore the arbitrary label of Eastern, Central, East-Central, Southeastern, the other Europe. I couldn’t keep them straight: the millions of Russians who had disappeared in Stalin’s camps, the millions who had perished in the Second World War, but also the ones who had occupied the Czechs and the Czechs who were occupied by the Russians and the Hungarians (they too occupied by the Russians) and the Bulgarians who fed the Russians and the Poles and the Romanians and the former Yugoslavs, who basically occupied themselves. I was beating my head against the wall of a generalized human loss.<sup>104</sup>

Tanja’s escape from this “generalized human loss” is signalled in the final chapter by its prefatory citation from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—like Dorothy, Tanja has also been lifted by a kind of cyclone to a place of perfection, one which seems less than real. The attempted mugging by three very young boys wearing schoolbags, one of whom carries a small toy knife, and another of whom lets out a piercing hateful scream—the lost echo of Tanja’s own scream—becomes the caesura of transformation. She suddenly sees Amsterdam anew, “a city of sky,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 233. Croatian: “Iako mi se činilo da imam *copy right* na ‘jugoslavensku’ priču, u tom trenutku sve su bile ‘moje.’ Plakala sam iznutra, ridala sam nad onim imaginarnim klupkom pobrkanih filmskih traka, koje su nosile na sebi proizvoljnu etiteku *Istočna, Centralna, Jugoistočna*, ona *druga* Evropa . . . Sve se zapetljalo u jedno, i oni milijuni Rusa nestalih u staljinističkim logorima, i oni milijuni poginulih u Drugom svjetskom ratu, i ti koji su okupirali Čehe, i Česi okupirani od Rusa, i Mađari koje su okupirali Rusi, i Bugari koji su Ruse hranili, i Poljaci, i Rumunji, i bivši Jugoslaveni, ti, koji su na kraju okupirali sami sebe. Udarala sam glavom o zid nekog općeg ljudskog gubitka” (278-79).



glass, and water. And it was my home.”<sup>105</sup> Playing a video quiz in the Anne Frank museum, realising that the museum house reminds her of the houses of her nightmares, she simply hits *Esc*. In the August afternoon, Tanja walks into a metaphorical clearing where her story merges with the perfection of the fairy tale in Šenoa’s *Branka*. In her new (after)life she has taken up babysitting again (and become an expert in nursery rhymes), begun to learn Dutch, and like the Dutch, has learnt to keep her curtains open. She repeats, without apparent irony, “life has been good to me,”<sup>106</sup> having found new happiness with Igor, who, as we learn, has suffered a post-traumatic episode known as “dissociative fugue.” In this fugue-state, Igor suddenly disappeared and traveled abroad, completely forgetting his identity. On “coming to” he remembered nothing of the episode. The deeply ironic threat to Tanja’s “new happiness” is that it could happen again at any time. Were that to occur, Igor would remember nothing of his life with her. In any case, Igor now works with an Irish home renovation crew, perhaps “driven by the insane notion that . . . for every wall he rebuilds here one will rise out of the ruins there, in the villages of Bosnia or Croatia or wherever it may be needed.”<sup>107</sup>

Tanja’s strange convalescence is unconditional surrender to the soothing amnesiac qualities of the Dutch landscape, to complete dissolution. It is the literalisation of her earlier declaration that “[t]here is no such thing as mercy, no such thing as compassion; there is only forgetting; there is only humiliation and

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 242. Croatian: “od neba, stakla i vode. Bio je to moj dom” (287).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 247. Croatian: “Život je dobar prema meni” (294).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 253-4. Croatian: “Možda ga goni suluda ideja da će . . . se sa svakim zidom koji je on obnovio *ovdje* obnoviti ruševina i *ondje*, po bosanskim i hrvatskim selima, ili negdje drugdje, gdje već treba” (301).

the pain of endless memory. That is the lesson we brought with us from the country we came from, and it is a lesson we haven't forgotten."<sup>108</sup> Yet Tanja's miraculous transformation is one that only the most naive reader would interpret as marked with any positive signification. In moments of passing madness (is there a such thing as passing madness?), like a lost daughter of Ljuba Šampion, Tanja uses a ritual of her own to shut the loosened lid of the suitcase of the past. She sends a litany of Balkan curses out into the winds racing over the flat Dutch horizon, which like an "old school blotter" absorbs everything. If our pasts are our installations and each of us the curator of his or her own museum, *The Ministry of Pain* suggests that there are never basements deep enough in which to bury all our unwanted exhibits.

#### 4.9 Pessimism and New Happiness

As noted in Chapter Two, in the first significant history of Croatian literature to be published in post-independence Croatia, Dubravka Ugrešić was declared one of only four writers who had "failed to recognise the historic moment for which Croatian literature had yearned for centuries."<sup>109</sup> And as indicated in the section on the novel's Croatian reception that follows, the aggravating factor underlying much Croatian criticism of Ugrešić's post-Yugoslav writing is her reluctance to uncritically embrace Croatia's—and Europe's—"new happiness." Interestingly, it was Russian poet Anna Akhmatova's reluctance to uncritically embrace the totalitarian happiness of Stalinism that led to Andrei Zhdanov's infamous 1946

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 215. Croatian: "Nema milosrđa, nema sućuti, postoji samo zaborav. I samo su poniženje i bol залог dugog pamćenja. To smo naučili u zemlji iz koje smo došli i to znanje nismo zaboravili" (259).

<sup>109</sup> Jelčić, *Povijest hrvatske književnosti*, 615.

dismissal of her work as marked by “pessimism, melancholia, and disappointment in life.”<sup>110</sup> With this in mind, it bears repeating that if *The Ministry of Pain* is at times offensive to our optimism, we should nonetheless remain on guard—against ourselves—to not also end up in Zhdanov’s company. *The Ministry of Pain* quietly tells its own story of a particular epoch, and to paraphrase Christa Wolf, represents an insistence that people not, in retrospect, be forced to deny that their lives had value; that their lives not be turned into phantoms or ghosts.<sup>111</sup> This is why Ugrešić, like Heinrich Böll, has no reason to be ashamed of a literature of war, return, and of ruins.

#### 4.10 Reception

If we again begin with the Croatian reviews of *The Ministry of Pain*, there appear to have been a total of seven. Four were fiercely disparaging, two lukewarm, and one cautiously positive. In terms of Jančar’s formulation about the literature of the east European ruins not standing a chance either at home or abroad, the Croatian reception of *The Ministry of Pain* certainly confirms that in this particular case Jančar was at least half-right. As a novel intimately concerned with the Yugoslav disintegration, it appears that there is a direct correlation between how deeply Ugrešić puts her pen into the wound and the violence of the Croatian rejection.

Although competition was certainly stiff for the most savage review, this was arguably won by Damir Radić writing in the *Nacional* weekly, his opening salvo:

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Brockmann, *German Literary Culture*, 148.

<sup>111</sup> Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, 40.

At first glance what irritates in Dubravka Ugrešić's new novel is its rigid ideological nature (of Yugonostalgic provenance), full of stereotypes (positive and negative value judgements), emboldened by mediocre outbursts characteristic of the preserve of so-called women's writing.<sup>112</sup>

Given such an opening, when Radić then proceeds to laud *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* as the best Croatian novel of the past fifteen years it is hard to take him seriously, particularly as he kept this to himself when the novel first appeared. He erroneously suggests that Croatian critics have been "benelovent" towards *Ministry*, a remark either baldly ignorant or simply economical with the truth. Radić accuses Velimir Visković<sup>113</sup> and Jagna Pogačnik of having followed the dictates of political correctness, and of "'wisely' concluding that the author's Yugonostalgia is simply mourning for years gone by, a mourning that has absolutely no connection with a political entity." For Radić this is all hypocrisy, for "Ugrešić's mourning absolutely includes a mourning for Yugoslavia as a state."<sup>114</sup> While maintaining that the novel's chief problem is one of aesthetic failure, Radić rejects Ugrešić's consistent presentation of what he calls a "dialectical antithesis" when analysing the Yugoslav past. Apparently attempting to hyperbolically outdo himself, he maintains that Ugrešić's characters are snivelling and self-pitying—"empty undignified creatures, too

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<sup>112</sup> Damir Radić, review of *Ministarstvo boli* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Nacional*, July 8, 2004. Croatian: "Ono što na prvi pogled iritira u novom romanu Dubravke Ugrešić tvrda je ideologiziranost (jugonostalgičarske provenijencije) prepuna stereotipova (vrijednosno pozitivnih i negativnih), prisnažena mediokritetskim ispadima karakterističnim za zabran tzv. ženskog pisma."

<sup>113</sup> Velimir Visković, "Sudbina etničkog otpada," review of *Ministarstvo boli* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Feral Tribune*, September 10, 2004. Visković's review is the only wholly positive review, but even he insists that the novel is inferior to *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*.

<sup>114</sup> Radić, review of *Ministarstvo boli*. Croatian: "'mudro' zaključuju da je autoričina jugonostalgija žal za minulim godinama te da se nikako ne radi o tugovanju za samom političkom tvorevinom. Sve je to, međutim, licemjerje. Ugrešićkin žal apsolutno uključuje žal za Jugoslavijom kao državom."

weak to provoke a sensation stronger than boredom.”<sup>115</sup> Matching Radić’s review in terms of viciousness was that of Dario Grgić, who reviewed the novel for the Zagreb-based radio station, *Radio 101*. It begins:

It is comforting to know that somewhere in the world there is an unknown person who—in your place—discovers enlightenment, suffers, dreams, surrenders to memories and—writes books! That’s probably how residents of all countries that have had the honour of writers living in the West write about them feel, where from the standpoint of the “Lika bear”<sup>116</sup> these writers ruminate on the state of the bear’s nation in the forests and mountains of the unforgotten Homeland. The bear’s sorrow is boundless!”<sup>117</sup>

He continues:

This phenomenon of writers from Croatia, if we can actually speak of a phenomenon, because the influence of these literats is literally meaningless, from Matvejević to Drakulić to Dubravka Ugrešić, is one of political correctness. It is how in tune they are with the official positions of the places of learning at which they earn their hard-earned exilic bread, how, for the most part, they have the answers to skillfully pre-formulated questions . . . not one of them has ever tried to take a look at themselves a little more comically, to calmly express him- or herself in, how shall we put it, a “non-Tsvetaevian” or “non-Brodskian” manner.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “ispraznih nedignitetnih kreatura, preslabih da bi izazvali senzaciju jaču od dosade.”

<sup>116</sup> Lika is a sparsely-populated region in the Croatian interior.

<sup>117</sup> Dario Grgić, review of *Ministarstvo boli* by Dubravka Ugrešić, Radio 101 website (page now unavailable), available at: <http://hombrezone.com/?p=691>. Croatian: “Utješno je znati da negdje u svijetu postoji nepoznat netko tko se umjesto tebe osvješčuje, pati, sanjari, prepušta sjećanjima i—piše knjige! Tako je vjerojatno stanovnicima svih zemalja koje su imale tu čast da o njima pišu pisci nastanjeni na Zapadu, gdje iz pozicije 'ličkog medvjeda' dumaju o stanju medvjede nacije po šumama i gorama nezaboravljene Domovine. Medvjeda je tuga pregolema!”

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Fenomen pisaca iz Hrvatske, ako se ovdje uopće može govoriti o fenomenu, jer je utjecaj tih literata literarno ipak beznačajan, od Matvejevića, Drakuličke do Dubravke Ugrešić, je u njihovoj političkoj korektnosti. U njihovoj usklađenosti sa službenim stavovima učilišta na kojima zarađuju svoj preteški egzilski hljeb, i u tome što, uglavnom, imaju odgovore na vješto i unaprijed postavljena pitanja . . . nitko od njih niti jedan jedini put nije sebe probao promotriti sa komične strane života.”

Other parts of Grgić's review are so deeply contextualized that translation is only possible if accompanied by a small army of footnotes, and frankly, making such an effort would be to give oxygen to a fool. At one point Grgić accuses literary exiles such as Ugrešić of hustling their way into well-paid teaching jobs abroad before "the lard on your arse had even cooled."<sup>119</sup> Were it published in one of Croatia's clerical-fascist mouthpieces, such a review would be easy to dismiss as an unfortunate perversity. Yet, if comparisons between two media are indeed possible, in Croatia the "alternative" Radio 101 is to broadcasting what *Zarez* is to cultural periodicals. As well as being a part-time poetaster, Grgić is one of Croatia's most prolific literary critics and a frequent contributor to *Zarez*. In many respects Grgić's review of the novel gives the lie to Zlatar's contention about the existence of the "two Croatias."

Though lacking the personal vitriol, the review on the *lupiga.com* portal (again written by "Bozzo," the pseudonym of Božidar Alajbegović) was equally dismissive of the novel as were those of Radić and Grgić. Alajbegović suggests that *The Ministry of Pain* deals with the same themes as *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, but in a much inferior fashion, which "in the end leaves us with the hope that Ugrešić has finally placed the subject of the disintegration of Yugoslavia *ad acta*."<sup>120</sup> (Certainly a progression that would be welcomed by many Croats.) He maintains that "the heroine ceaselessly laments over her fate,

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "još ti se ni salo na guzi ohladilo nije."

<sup>120</sup> "Bozzo" [Božidar Alajbegović], review of *Ministarstvo boli* by Dubravka Ugrešić, <http://www.lupiga.com/knjige/opsirnije.php?id=3133> [accessed September 16, 2011]. Croatian: "Na koncu, ostaje nam nada da je *Ministarstvom boli* Ugrešićka temu raspada Jugoslavije napokon stavila *ad acta*."

almost enjoying her position as victim,”<sup>121</sup> and that “the novel abounds with a marked bitterness and often irritating self-pity and patheticness, and a local reader will not infrequently be bothered by the numerous explanations included for the sake of the future recipient of the foreign edition.”<sup>122</sup> Like Radić, Alajbegović tries to suggest that the novel is an aesthetic failure, yet reveals his true objection in the concomitant suggestion that Ugrešić is “flogging a thematically (and ideologically) dead horse.”

The comments section on the *lupiga.com* portal was filled with anonymous bilious rage. One respondent (“iz Slovenije”) writes “[i]f she [Ugrešić] fled because of her ideals, today she’s living very well off their sale. And anyway, she was never a real dissident. Neither were the others who wished they were, but weren’t.”<sup>123</sup> Another (“Marica”) writes “[w]e should have drafted the old goat into the army and sent her to the front so she could get to know her ‘brothers,’”<sup>124</sup> later adding that “the book is trash and she’s trash too and the worst kind, GREATER SERBIAN TRASH. Poor thing, she calls herself a victim, but she doesn’t give a fuck about the war. If only she could actually write, but she can’t even do that.”<sup>125</sup> Finally, “Staljin” chipped in with “[c]’mon, it’d be better if the Yugonostalgic stripped herself naked so all of us living in ignorance could go

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “junakinja bez prestanka lamentira nad svojom sudbinom i gotovo da uživa u vlastitom položaju žrtve.”

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “roman obiluje osjetnom gorčinom i čestim iritantnim samosažaljenjem i patetikom, a domaćeg čitatelja nerijetko će zasmetati i brojna pojašnjenja upućena budućem recipijentu inozemnog izdanja.”

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “ako je nekad zaista bježala zbog ideala, ona danas od prodaje istih izvrsno živi. Osim toga, ona nikad nije bila neki istinski disident. Kao ni ostali koji bi voljeli da jesu, a nisu!”

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Trebali smo kozetinu mobilizirati i poslati na ratiste.. pa da vidi svoju ‘bracu.”

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “knjiga je smeće a i ona je smeće i to najgore, VELIKOSRPSKO SMEĆE.. jadnica, ona sebe zove žrtvom, a za rat joj se jebe.. da barem zna pisati, ne zna ni to..”

blind.”<sup>126</sup>

Robert Perišić’s review in *Globus* (that magazine again!) begins with the fateful declaration: “Dubravka Ugrešić is still on the same topic.”<sup>127</sup> Perišić takes an unswervingly condescending tone when summarizing the novel’s plot, contending that Ugrešić’s characters simply aren’t convincing, that “Professor Lucić often resembles the spokeswoman for Ugrešić’s insufficiently controlled essayism,”<sup>128</sup> and that “Ugrešić doesn’t maintain the correct distance from her heroine, so we experience her more as a ‘semi-autobiographical’ extension, than a real character.”<sup>129</sup> The review also includes a small insert-box explaining that with the novel’s subject matter being similar to Kundera’s *Ignorance* it could have reached “international standards,” but doesn’t.<sup>130</sup>

The final two reviews, the first by Jagna Pogačnik in *Jutarnji list* and the second by Strahomir Primorac in *The Bridge/Most* were more benign, yet also critical in certain key respects. Pogačnik is adamant that the novel is “to a large extent an autobiographical novel,”<sup>131</sup> or as she alternatively puts it, one that is “definitely full of autobiographical knots.”<sup>132</sup> Here Andrea Zlatar’s reminder of Paul de

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Dajte rađe da se jugonostalgičarka skine gola pa da svi koji živimo u neznanju oslijepimo.”

<sup>127</sup> Robert Perišić, review of *Ministarstvo boli* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Globus* September 3, 2004. Croatian: “Dubravka Ugrešić još je na istoj temi.”

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Profesorica Lucić često slični na ‘glasnogovornika’ Ugrešićkinog nedovoljno kontroliranog eseizma.”

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Problem je što Ugrešićka prema junakinji nije zauzela pravu distancu, pa je osjećamo više kao ‘poluautobiografski’ produžetak, nego kao pravi lik.”

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Po svojoj temi roman ‘Ministarstvo boli’ mogao je, poput Kunderina ‘Neznanja,’ doseći svjetsku razinu, ali je ne doseže.”

<sup>131</sup> Jagna Pogačnik, “Knjiga o egzilu,” review of *Ministarstvo boli* by Dubravka Ugrešić. *Jutarnji list* [Croatia], n.d. Collected in *Proza poslije FAK-a* (Zagreb: Profil International, 2006). Croatian: “u velikoj mjeri autobiografski roman” (343).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “definitivno prepun autobiografskih krhotina.”



Man's teaching—that a writer not using the autobiographical matrix doesn't preclude it being used by the reader—is extremely timely.<sup>133</sup> Pogačnik's review concludes:

For my taste, in *The Ministry of Fear* [sic]<sup>134</sup> there are several unnecessary episodes, above all those that concern the Hague tribunal and its most famous indictee because they open the door to excessive politicization and explanation, which in a novel such as this, one dealing with private and intimate traumas, are superfluous, and the same goes for the strained passages (for example, those on anti-globalization) in which an enraged narratorial voice emerges. What could be polemic in the novel is indeed its unconcealed and obvious "Yugonostalgia," even though this Yugonostalgia is at some remove from nostalgia for a political entity; it is simply nostalgia for the years in one's life in which one didn't feel like a stranger in one's own skin.<sup>135</sup>

This is a schizophrenic and shallow take on Yugonostalgia. If Ugrešić's Yugonostalgia really is of a private nature, then it begs the obvious question of why it would be polemical to anyone. Pogačnik inadvertently proves Ugrešić's point that, vis-à-vis any kind of memories of the former Yugoslavia, in Croatia *the private is political*—or more to the point, the private is *politicized*. While the same may also be true for the other republics of the former Yugoslavia, it is nevertheless remarkable to note that the six reviews of the novel from Serbia and two reviews from Bosnia were unanimously positive.

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<sup>133</sup> See Zlatar, "Pisanje u egzilu/azilu," 38.

<sup>134</sup> Pogačnik gets the title of the novel wrong three times in the course of her review.

<sup>135</sup> Pogačnik, "Knjiga o egzilu." Croatian: "Za moj ukus, u Ministarstvu? straha postoji nekoliko nepotrebnih epizoda, prije svega onih koje se tiču haškog suda i njegovog najpoznatijeg optuženika jer se tu otvara prostor za mali suvišak politiziranja i objašnjavanja koji ovome romanu, koji se bavi privatnim i intimnim traumama, uopće nije potreban jer se podrazumijeva, kao i onih tenzičnih dijelova (recimo, antiglobalističkih) u kojima se otkriva bijesan pripovjedački glas. Ono što u ovome romanu može biti polemično jest neprikrivena i očita 'jugonostalgija,' ali ta je 'jugonostalgija' daleko od nostalgije za nekakvom političkom tvorevinom, to je jednostavno nostalgija za nekim godinama života u kojima se u vlastitoj koži nije osjećalo kao u koži stranca" (345).

The final review by Strahimir Primorac in *Most/The Bridge*, an official literary journal of the nationalist Society of Croatian Writers (*Društvo hrvatskih književnika*) was, in comparison to all other reviews (barring those of Visković and Pogačnik), surprisingly mild. Primorac interpreted the fact that *The Ministry of Pain* was the first of Ugrešić's post-Yugoslav books to appear in Croatia before the publication of any foreign edition as a "positive signal of the normalization of things and the 'reintegration' of this writer into her maternal literature."<sup>136</sup> Yet even Primorac concludes his review with mixed-messages:

Artistically and ethically the possible problematic point of (also) this novel—one long in evidence where texts thematizing exile are concerned—is indeed the 'off-kilter' picture of the past.

It has always been such: writers who have long been in exile are prone to nostalgically return to the past, their own and that of society, which then constricts the narratorial perspective and leads to a deformed image of the vanished reality. But let us not get mixed up: Ugrešić's text . . . is not a political pamphlet, but a novel that in its essence is set in motion by politics.<sup>137</sup>

Like the Francophone reviews of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, those of the *The Ministry of Pain* were again generally very positive, although again lacking in length, depth, and, occasionally, accuracy. In a review that framed the novel as one about language, Raphaëlle Leyris in *Les Inrockuptibles* asks "[b]ut how does one refer to a language that has invented a word for bread for the

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<sup>136</sup> Strahimir Primorac, "Prozor u svakodnevnicu egzila," review of *Ministarstvo boli* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Most/The Bridge* no. 3 (2004). Collected in *Prozor u prozu* (Zagreb: Društvo hrvatskih književnika, 2005), 489-92. Croatian: "Pozitivan je signal normalizacije stanja i 'reintegracije' ove književnice u matičnu književnost."

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. Croatian: "Moguća umjetnički i etički problematična točka (i) ovog romana-kako je već ranije uočeno kad su inače posrijedi tekstovi koji tematiziraju egzil-jest 'pomaknuta' slika prošlosti.

Oduvijek je tako: pisci koji su dugo u egzilu skloni su nostalgično se vraćati prošlosti, vlastitoj i društvenoj, što onda sužava pripovjedačevu perspektivu i dovodi do deformiranja predodžbe o toj nestaloj zbilji. Ali nemojmo ipak zamijeniti teze: Ugrešićkin tekst . . . nije politički pamflet, nego roman koji u osnovi pokreće politika."

Croats, the Bosniaks, and the Serbs, and yet continues to use the word for death, ‘*smrt*,’ as it did before?”<sup>138</sup> Leyris is referring to Tanja’s musings on language, but doesn’t realize that the words *kruh* (Croatian), *hljeb* (Bosnian), and *hleb* (Serbian) were not invented with the war.<sup>139</sup> The otherwise thoughtful review by Sebastian L. on the *Le Globe-lecteur* website bills Ugrešić as “a new up-and-coming voice in eastern Europe”<sup>140</sup>—despite the novel being her fifth book published in France since 1993. The Swiss *Femina* website likewise makes the bald claim that Ugrešić is known internationally for “one of her first novels”<sup>141</sup>—*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*.

Thierry Cecille’s review on the *Le Matricule des Anges* website also gives the lie to the frequent Croatian insinuation that Ugrešić’s work has been met with an undifferentiated and uncritical response abroad. Referring to Ugrešić’s depictions of Tanja’s students, Cecille maintains that

it is disappointing that the portrait gallery is so thinly sketched: none of the students has any real substance, and when one commits suicide—because his father is to be tried at the Hague Tribunal—we don’t believe it.

Similarly, while the reflections on language (“language is a dialect backed by an army”) or exile (“a landscape of absence” issuing an

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<sup>138</sup> Raphaëlle Leyris, “Ne tirez pas sur la langue,” review of *La ministre de la douleur* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Les Inrockuptibles*, September 9, 2008. French: “Mais comment désigner cette langue qui a inventé un nom de pain pour les Croates, les Bosniaques et les Serbes, et qui continue à dire la mort, ‘*smrt*,’ de la même façon?”

<sup>139</sup> One should also note that *hljeb* and *hleb* are not actually different words, but simply represent the ijekavian and ekavian variants of “Serbo-Croatian.”

<sup>140</sup> Sebastian L., “Processus de Désintégration,” review of *La ministre de la douleur* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Le globe-lecteur*, December 24, 2008, <http://lireplus.mabulle.com/index.php/2008/12/24/170075-dubravka-ugresic-le-ministere-de-la-douleur> [accessed September 16, 2011]. French: “Dubravka Ugrešić s’affirme comme la nouvelle voix montante de l’Europe de l’Est.”

<sup>141</sup> *Femina*, review of *La ministre de la douleur* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Femina.ch*, <http://www.femina.ch/loisirs/le-ministere-de-la-douleur> [accessed September 16, 2011]. French: “Dubravka Ugrešić est connue dans le monde entier pour l’un de ses premiers romans *Le Musée des redditions sans condition*.”

“invisible slap” to the face of anyone who has more than one country) are often acute and counteract “the auto-anaesthesia” that threatens the exhausted exile, the assaults on Amsterdam as “a sad Disneyland for adults” and “the largest doll house in the world” come across as annoying and trivial. The construction of the novel itself fails: the return to Zagreb during the short semester break could have allowed for a description of what has happened to the city and its people, in this new country now knocking at the door of Europe, but this section is rushed and hasty. The few pages devoted to the narrator's mother (who figured prominently, fully-rendered and affecting in the previous novel) is also somewhat unsuccessful and rather hollow.<sup>142</sup>

While the above view is certainly Cecille's critical prerogative, he regrettably appears to be criticizing Ugrešić for her failure to provide some kind of tourist guide to Zagreb and its residents, for not explaining something to French readers about “this new country now knocking at the door of Europe.” The fact is that Tanja herself is speechless on returning to Zagreb: what can she report about a city she no longer recognises? Likewise, it is interesting to contrast Cecille's criticism of Tanja's students being “thinly sketched” with the praise their portrayal drew from Aida Vidan in *World Literature Today* as “well rounded, and in linguistic terms, finely etched. Their fates are strangely unique and ubiquitous at the same time: these fictional characters have many real cousins in numerous

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<sup>142</sup> Thierry Cecille, review of *La ministère de la douleur* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Le Matricule des Anges*, [http://www.lmda.net/din/tit\\_lmda.php?Id=59423](http://www.lmda.net/din/tit_lmda.php?Id=59423) [accessed September 16, 2011] September, 2008. French: “Mais il est assez décevant que cette galerie de portraits ne soit qu'à peine ébauchée: aucun de ces élèves n'a de véritable consistance et lorsque l'un d'eux en vient à se suicider—parce que son père va être jugé au TPI de La Haye—nous n'y croyons pas.

De même, si les réflexions qui concernent la langue (‘une langue est un dialecte soutenu par une armée’) ou l'exil (‘paysage de l'absence’ qui inflige sur le visage de celui qui n'a plus de pays une ‘gifle invisible’) sont souvent aiguës et contrecarrent l'autoanesthésie qui pourrait menacer l'apatride épuisée, les formules à l'emporte-pièce sur Amsterdam, ‘triste Disneyland pour adultes’ et ‘plus grande maison de poupée du monde,’ apparaissent comme des facilités gênantes. La construction même du roman est défaillante: le retour à Zagreb, à l'occasion de courtes vacances scolaires, aurait pu permettre une description de ce que sont devenues cette ville et sa population, dans ce pays nouveau qui désormais frappe à la porte de l'Europe—mais cette partie est bien trop courte, hâtive. Les quelques pages ici consacrées à la mère de la narratrice (qui était un personnage marquant, riche et émouvant, du précédent roman) sont également assez ratées, plutôt creuses.”

Western cities.”<sup>143</sup> Given that Vidan herself left Croatia around the same time as Ugrešić (to pursue graduate study in the United States), and has for a number of years taught Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian at Harvard University, her observations carry a certain weight.

The German reviews were again more numerous than the Francophone, and superior in terms of their critical apparatus, yet also contained recurrent misreadings. In *Die Presse* Karl-Markus Gauß writes that “a somewhat unbelievable epilogue tries to romantically mitigate”<sup>144</sup> the horror of the novel. With Gauß a longtime follower and champion of Ugrešić’s work it is difficult to understand how he missed the point that the “happy-ending” for Tanja and Igor is not intended to be credible. Beatrice Eichmann-Leutenegger in *Der Bund* had similar difficulties with the ending, finding it “irritating,” “because it escapes all psychological logic,”<sup>145</sup> while Dorothea Dieckmann in *Die Zeit* wishfully reads the ending as having fulfilled the reader’s desire for resolution. On the other hand, a number of others had little difficulty understanding, as Helmut Böttiger put it, that the “happy end” can only be seen “in an ironically broken light.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Aida Vidan, review of *The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *World Literature Today* 79, no. 3/4 (Sep-Dec 2005): 102.

<sup>144</sup> Karl-Markus Gauß, “Die gestreifte Tasche,” review of *Das Ministerium der Schmerzen* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Die Presse* <http://diepresse.com/home/diverse/literatur/155228/Identitaet-Die-gestreifte-Tasche> [accessed September 5, 2011], September 24, 2005. German: “ein etwas ungläubwürdiger Epilog romantisch abzumildern versucht.”

<sup>145</sup> Beatrice Eichmann-Leutenegger. “Verordneter Gedächtnisverlust.” *Der Bund*, January 12, 2006. German: “Der Schluss des Buches irritiert vollends, weil er sich jeder psychologischen Logik entzieht.”

<sup>146</sup> Helmut Böttiger, “Heimatlos,” review of *Das Ministerium der Schmerzen* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Deutschlandradio*, <http://www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/kritik/437277/> [accessed September 5, 2011] November 14, 2005. German: “Zu einem Happy End kann es, bei all den Voraussetzungen dieser vom Bürgerkrieg gezeichneten Generation, höchstens in einem ironisch gebrochenen Licht kommen.”

Neither were the Germanophone reviews entirely free of simple idiocies. Eveline Petzoldt, in a review for *Norddeutscher Rundfunk*, appeared to want to up the melodrama quotient, and thus claims that Tanja's husband Goran used the job offer in Japan to escape their unhappy marriage, a move that takes poor Tanja by surprise. The novel suggests nothing of the sort: it is Tanja who refuses to accompany Goran to Japan and the solitary hint that Ugrešić offers as to the (possibly) shakey quality of the marriage is also given by Tanja. Making matters worse, Petzoldt ends her review with the clunky, non-sequitural "Dubravka Ugrešić has written a political novel."<sup>147</sup>

In her recent essay "A Question of Perspective" Ugrešić writes of leaving Croatia in the early nineties only to have Croatia constantly "boomeranging back," "perfidiously following me around."<sup>148</sup> Tomislav Kuzmanović's review of *The Ministry of Pain* in the *Iowa Review* appears a belated example of the phenomenon, Kuzmanović being a lecturer at the University of Zadar. Although the review contains enough positive remarks to honour the conventions of academic bon ton, it is nevertheless marked by insidious instances of double-speak, the first being: "[i]t may seem as if *The Ministry of Pain* is yet another book taking advantage of the notoriety of the former Yugoslavia and its recent bloodthirsty war, but that is not the case here. *At least not entirely*" (my emphasis).<sup>149</sup> Concluding, Kuzmanović asks:

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<sup>147</sup> Eveline Petzoldt, review of *Das Ministerium der Schmerzen* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *NDR1*, October 19, 2005. German: "Dubravka Ugrešić hat einen politischen Roman geschrieben."

<sup>148</sup> Ugrešić, *Karaoke Culture*, 232-3. Croatian: "ponašala se poput bumeranga" (236); "Ponekad me hrvatsko podmuklo pratilo" (237).

<sup>149</sup> Tomislav Kuzmanović, "S&M of Exile," review of *The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Iowa Review* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 178.

Still, what remains is the question of who this book is actually for. Refugees and exiles from the former Yugoslavia living all over the world—readers who will suffer the same sadomasochistic feelings as the novels’ characters—would probably describe it as having too many Yugonostalgic sentiments. It might be irritating to real-life exiles to find their likenesses strolling over the pages; I am not entirely sure the exilic community wants or will cherish such clear reflections. Other readers? Lost identities, borders, displacements, exile, etc., can definitely be of interest to many. Numerous references to the former Yugoslavia scattered all over the novel might be a little too much to handle.<sup>150</sup>

In Kuzmanović’s reading, on the one hand the novel is unlikely to be welcomed by ex-Yugoslavs in the diaspora (who know it all already), and on the other, full of local colour, it is likely to prove exasperating for foreign readers. It is difficult to speculate on the accuracy of Kuzmanović’s first contention, yet with regard to the second, having considered the empirical evidence of well over fifty Francophone, Germanophone, and Anglophone reviews of the novel, I can state that not a single reviewer noted a problem of this nature. Minor errors and the odd major blunder aside, perhaps foreign readers are not quite as stupid or disengaged as Kuzmanović appears to believe.

A better example of an exceedingly positive review that nonetheless contained several critical comments was that of Michael G. Agovino in *The New York Review of Books*. Agovino suggests that some of the writing appears uneven (wrongly blaming Heim’s elegant translation), that some of the dialogue rings like “a sweet art-house movie,”<sup>151</sup> and that some scenes, such as that of Tanja and her fellow Croatian exile on the plane returning from Zagreb, appear to be staged. The latter

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Michael J. Agovino, review of *The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *New York Times Book Review*, May 14, 2006.

criticism may indeed hold water, an unintended consequence of Ugrešić's long-practised "patchwork" technique in what is her narratively most conventional novel. Yet as Agovino writes, "this is all countered, however, by paragraph after startling paragraph of heightened philosophical musings."<sup>152</sup> James Hopkins in the *The Times* likewise offers a balanced critique of the novel, suggesting that in such a fusion of genres Ugrešić "often lacks the poetic vision to raise the material beyond its sources," yet concludes that despite "occasional awkwardness of the narrative as fiction, this is a disturbing read that should have you in its thrall."<sup>153</sup> Again, both examples underscore the fact that Ugrešić's work has never received a free pass abroad.

As with a small number of the foreign reviews of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, those of *The Ministry of Pain* occasionally reveal western ignorance about the former Yugoslavia and eastern Europe, not to mention a readiness to resort to mindless and meaningless clichés. The anonymous review in *Publisher's Weekly* concludes: "Tanja's narration, which combines ongoing if eloquent meditation on language and a numb, distanced approach to overwhelming loss, lends the novel an East bloc sterility."<sup>154</sup> This allegedly "numb, distanced approach to overwhelming loss" was of course viewed in exactly the opposite manner by the many Croatian critics who argued that Tanja is hypersensitive and over-emotional. The latter comment about the novel having "an East bloc sterility" is best left drowning at the bottom of the barrel of Cold War clichés.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> James Hopkins, "This side of paradise," review of *The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Times*, September 24, 2005.

<sup>154</sup> *Publisher's Weekly*, review of *The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugrešić, December 19, 2005.



A perhaps more inadvertent blunder was evidenced in Meredith Tax's review in the *Women's Review of Books*, a slip all the more surprising given that Tax was one of the most vocal foreign advocates for Ugrešić and her fellow "witches" in the early nineties. Tax should have known much better:

Twenty years ago, the countries of Eastern Europe were self-contained and cut off, like leather pouches tied on a peasant's belt: no one could get in and no one could get out. While life inside these pouches was dark and claustrophobic, it offered the comfort of deep familiarity and social homogeneity. In 1993, the long knives slashed open the pouch called Yugoslavia, and the people in it were flung to the ground like millions of tiny marbles: many died, most lay where they fell, but some went rolling away to the corners of the earth.<sup>155</sup>

Tax's inability to differentiate between the former Yugoslavia and the other countries of "Eastern Europe" with regard to freedom of movement, let alone other freedoms, doesn't bear further comment.

Like Robert Perišić, the anonymous *Kirkus* reviewer drew a comparison to Kundera, suggesting that "[t]oward the end, the plot veers into unexpected and not entirely welcome psychosexual melodrama, as Tanja enjoys a sadomasochistic encounter rife with all sorts of neat Kundera-esque significance (c.f. the title)."<sup>156</sup> Apart from the different signification attributed to the Kundera association (for Perišić the novel fails to reach Kundera-esque heights, for the *Kirkus* reviewer Kundera is not necessarily a welcome height to aim for), the *Kirkus* review was otherwise highly complimentary. Finally, on a related note, it

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<sup>155</sup> Meredith Tax, "The Language without Name," review of *The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Women's Review of Books*, January 1, 2007.

<sup>156</sup> *Kirkus Reviews*, review of *The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Kirkus* 74, no. 3, February 1, 2006.

is striking that at least three of the Anglo-American reviews were written by writers, rather than critics— Aamer Hussein in the *Independent*, Todd McEwen in the *Guardian*, Elizabeth Gold in the *San Francisco Chronicle*—yet unlike Ugrešić’s Croatian “colleagues,” (Perišić, Drndić, Grgić), the Anglo-American trio showed absolutely no signs of insecurity in the face of Ugrešić’s literary talent.

Bringing together the reviews glossed here, one can only reiterate and refine the points made earlier vis-à-vis the reception of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Unlike that novel, *The Ministry of Pain* was certainly not ignored in Croatia, but was met with a hostility wholly disproportionate to the book’s possible sins. Moreover, its Croatian reception again challenged the general quality of Andrea Zlatar’s suggestion of the existence of “two Croatias,” revealing that in regard to Ugrešić’s work at least, Croatian nationalists and “cosmopolitans” appear to have found rare common ground, and strikingly, that the reasons for their rejection were essentially the same. As indicated earlier, Kundera’s exilic fiction was rejected by both Czech dissidents (those who had remained in the country) and the communist authorities, yet in his case each side rejected it for vastly different reasons. In terms of the foreign reception of *The Ministry of Pain* there is little new to say. Given its less formal demands on the reader (compared to *Museum*), and its (European) metropolitan setting and global concerns, it is perplexing that the novel never expanded Ugrešić’s audience to readers who, as it might best be put, wouldn’t usually “watch a film with subtitles,” but occasionally do. In this light, Jančar appears to really have been right that “the literature of the ‘east European ruins’” has never stood a real chance abroad.

## 5. TRÜMMERLITERATUR REDUX

### 5.1 “Where does the sadness in me come from?”

In an essay entitled “The Foreign Gaze: On the Melancholy of the East Germans in their Second Life,”<sup>1</sup> Jana Hensel recalls an evening at which a fellow East German writer, Thomas Rosenlöcher, remarked that he didn’t know a single East German who now gave an honest account of his or her biography; that, in accordance with the demands of the “new time,” East Germans have either polished, roughened, or straightened out their life stories. Hensel maintains that 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, East Germans still look at themselves through foreign eyes, through a gaze that emerges

when a world falls apart and overnight new and hitherto unfamiliar values come into force. When people from one day to the next are forced to look at their lives differently . . . It is similar to the feeling of having already died once. It is the experience that trying to begin life for a second time, as if it were the first, just doesn’t work. Because one always ends up dividing one’s life into a “Before” and an “After,” and sees oneself in both lives.<sup>2</sup>

For Hensel, the result of this division is a melancholia such as that articulated by Joachim Gauck, reunified Germany’s first Stasi *Aufarbeiter*, who in 2009 at an event commemorating the fall of the Wall stated “I have asked myself

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<sup>1</sup> Jana Hensel, “Der Fremde Blick: Über die Melancholie der Ostdeutschen im zweiten Leben,” *Der Spiegel*, November 9, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-67682732.html> [accessed August 3, 2010].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. German: “[Es ist auch] ein Blick, der entsteht, wenn eine Welt zusammenbricht und über Nacht neue und bisher unbekannte Werte gelten. Wenn die Menschen sich von einem Tag auf den anderen gezwungen sehen, ihr Leben anders zu betrachten . . . Es gleicht dem Gefühl, schon einmal gestorben zu sein. Es ist die Erfahrung, dass es eben doch nicht funktioniert, ein Leben zum zweiten Mal so beginnen zu wollen, als sei es das erste. Weil man dieses Leben dann stets in ein Vorher und ein Nachher teilt und sich selbst zusieht bei diesen zwei Leben.”

sometimes, where does the sadness in me come from, after so many victories? We won everything!”<sup>3</sup> From another eastern geography, Gauck’s disclosure appears an echo of what the narrator of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* calls the “undefined sadness . . . of a shared ‘East European trauma,’” and Tanja, in *The Ministry of Pain*, “the wall of a generalized human loss.”

Leaving aside the question of whether the East German citizens’ movement really won everything they wanted,<sup>4</sup> in comparison to the “Second Life” of former Yugoslavs,<sup>5</sup> East Germans could well be said to have won everything. Yet combined, Hensel, Gauck, and Ugrešić’s reflections point to the fact that, irrespective of the categories of “winners” and “losers,” a certain post-1989 sadness seems to have spread to almost everyone. It is the sadness captured in the title essay of György Konrád’s 1995 collection *On the Melancholy of Rebirth*.

Moving beyond *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Ministry of Pain*, Ugrešić’s post-1989 “ruin novels” par excellence, the aim is to now suggest the broader currency of the notion of *Trümmerliteratur Redux* as a literary-historical framework for a larger body of post-1989 east European literary production.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, this chapter provides evidence in support of Jančar’s suggestion of a “literature of the ‘east European ruins,’” one created as writers bore witness not

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. German: “Ich habe mich manchmal gefragt, woher kommt die Traurigkeit in mir nach so vielen Siegen? Wir haben alles gewonnen!”

<sup>4</sup> We might remember that the original goal of the *Neues Forum* was not reunification, but the democratic reform of the GDR’s authoritarian character.

<sup>5</sup> Here it is important to remember that an estimated 100,000 “Yugoslavs” died not symbolic, but very real deaths; several million found themselves internally and externally displaced, and the vast majority were left impoverished and isolated as never before.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the other novels considered for inclusion in this chapter were Andrzej Stasiuk’s *Dziewięć* (1999, *Nine*), Dorota Masłowska’s *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną* (2002, translated as *Snow White and Russian Red*), and Vladimir Arsenijević’s *U potpaljublju* (1994, *In the Hold*).

only to the physical ruins of the former Yugoslavia, but also to the metaphorical ruins of the entire world in which east Europeans lived.

## **5.2 Ingo Schulze: *Simple Stories: Ein Roman aus der ostdeutschen Provinz* (1998)**

Ingo Schulze's *Simple Stories* is but one of the dozen or so novels that have at various times been hailed as the long-awaited *Wenderoman* ("novel of the changes"), the literary work that will explain life in the German Democratic Republic, the "peaceful revolution" of 1989, and the experience of life in reunified Germany both to Germans themselves, and to the rest of the world. *Simple Stories* owes a significant structural and stylistic debt to Robert Altman's 1993 film *Short Cuts* (itself based on nine short stories and a poem by Raymond Carver), which weaves together a set of seemingly unrelated Los Angeles-based stories in the early 1990s. Schulze's novel consists of 29 sparsely-written chapters set in the East German town of Altenburg, spanning the period between February 1990 and the summer of 1997. The novel's fugue-like structure offers multiple narrative perspectives that articulate and rearticulate common themes, and in this way individual experiences come to underpin the collective experience of a society in the throes of upheaval. Regarding the very American aesthetics of the novel, Schulze<sup>7</sup> explains:

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<sup>7</sup> The Dresden-born Schulze (1962-) is among the most awarded, translated, and prolific writers to have emerged from the former GDR. Published in 1998, *Simple Stories* is his second book and followed his 1993 collection of short stories *33 Augenblicke des Glücks* (*33 Moments of Happiness*). He has subsequently published the novels *Neue Leben* (2005, *New Lives*), *Adam und Evelyn* (2008), the short story collections *Handy: Dreizehn Geschichten in alter Manier* (2007, *Handy: thirteen stories in the time-honoured fashion*) and *Orangen und Engel: Italienische Skizzen* (2010, *Oranges and angels: Italian sketches*), the collection of non-fiction writings *Was wollen wir* (2009, *What do we want*), the illustrated stories *Der Herr Augustin* (2008, *Mr. Augustin*) and *Augusto, der Richter* (2010, *Augusto, the judge*), as well as several other works of miscellanea. Following his secondary schooling he completed compulsory military service and

Almost overnight we found ourselves in the middle of the American world. And that led to a form and a language that was developed under capitalism, where money was actual money and things were important. You could never tell stories about the GDR in the style of Hemingway . . . The linguistic situation in the GDR was a totally different one, money was not really money at all. An important characteristic of the short story is that a lot of it deals with things and money, there is not much politics . . . He [Hemingway] conveys everything via the private sphere, through relationships. When I read Carver for the first time, I thought: this is so boring, there are only dialogues, in the bedroom, in the kitchen.<sup>8</sup>

This aesthetic “stripping back” is of course reminiscent of Böll’s insistence on minimalistic and realistic depiction. In his postcolonial reading of the novel, Paul Cooke sees Schulze’s borrowing from the American short story tradition in terms of Homi Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry,” suggesting, in a paraphrase of Bhabha, that “the only option open to the subject is to take on the identity, or inhabit the space, constructed for him by the coloniser.”<sup>9</sup> Such a reading is nevertheless discordant with Schulze’s stated literary motivations. With reference to Schulze’s reminder that “Simple Storys” should be pronounced in proper German (“storys” is the correct German plural of “story”), Cooke likewise suggests that the novel’s title indicates “a sense of incongruity between the coloniser and his mirror image.”<sup>10</sup> One might counter, however, that both the title’s intended irony (the stories themselves are anything but simple) and Schulze’s stated admiration for

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went on to study Classical Philology and German at the University of Jena. Between 1988 and 1990 he worked as an assistant director at the State Theatre in Altenburg, and between 1990 and 1992 set up and ran two free newspapers in the town. Following a six-month stint in St. Petersburg in 1993 (setting up the city’s first free advertising-supported newspaper), which inspired his debut short story collection, Schulze has since dedicated himself to writing full-time.

<sup>8</sup> Dagmar Jaegar, “Only in the 1990s Did I Become East German’: A Conversation with Ingo Schulze about Remembering the GDR, *Simple Storys*, and *33 Moments of Happiness*; with an Introduction to His Work,” *New German Critique* 101, no. 34.2 (Summer 2007): 151.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Cooke, “Beyond a *Trotzidentität*? Storytelling and the Postcolonial Voice in Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Storys*,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 39, no. 3 (July 2003): 298.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Hemingway's *49 Stories* offer more plausible clues—less theoretically spectacular though they might be.

In correspondence with Jürgen Habermas about East German life after the *Wende*, Christa Wolf wrote that “those who consented to the accession had little choice but to adapt and submit, and certainly [had] no more scope for political action. The resulting image of a hasty surrender is thus not entirely inaccurate.”<sup>11</sup> The following reading suggests that *Simple Stories* is a novel about East German surrender, and that as depicted by Schulze, this surrender was indeed *unconditional*. Although *Simple Stories* includes enough rebukes aimed westwards, it is a novel more about survival than defiance; if there is at all a heroism, it is one of endurance, not resistance.

*Simple Stories* begins with Ernst and Renate Meurer taking a trip to Italy in February 1990 using forged West German documents. As people of the ruins they pack provisions for the trip in the “Made in Eastern Europe” black-and-red-checked bag. In Venice Renate immediately notices that the Venetian women are dressed in a stylish summery manner, and that she, Ernst, and their fellow East Germans are fashion incompatible. Having all dressed too warmly, their exaggerated fear of the cold immediately betrays their “easternness.” Renate, too, confirms the difficulty of coming to terms with one’s “second life”:

You have to try and imagine it. Suddenly you’re in Italy and have a West German passport. My name was Ursula and Ernst was Bodo, we lived in Straubing, Bavaria. I’ve forgotten our last names. You wake up on the other side of the world and are amazed to find yourself eating and drinking just like at home, putting one foot in front of the other as if this

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<sup>11</sup> Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, 110.

were all perfectly natural. Brushing my teeth and looking into the mirror, I found it even harder to believe that I was in Italy.<sup>12</sup>

The subplot involving Harry Nelson, a Frankfurt businessman who arrives in the “Wild East” in May of 1990 with the scent of quick money in his nostrils, displays the novel’s sharpest observations on West and East German rapprochement. Harry is in the property speculation business and a picture of him shaking hands with the mayor in front of the proposed site for a BP petrol station soon appears in the local paper. Harry is far from being a lone wolf— representatives of the big West German banks (Commerzbank) and insurance companies (Allianz) are also circling, and even a pair of Pakistanis turn up, selling not old Soviet medals and fur caps (as they did in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*), but hand-woven floor rugs. Before leaving town Harry rapes the infatuated Connie, a waitress at the hotel. As gender scholars would be quick to note, Harry Nelson (with his particularly American sounding name<sup>13</sup>), a representative of an aggressive and masculine West is involved in the rape of the feminine East, a rape that takes two literal forms: the physical rape of Connie (whose father Dieter Schubert was a victim of communist persecution), and the financial rape of the GDR’s ruined economy. Both assaults take an even more sinister tone when viewed in the context of Ingrid Sharp’s suggestion that “the union [German reunification] had strong fairy tale elements: star-crossed lovers kept apart by feuding realities

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<sup>12</sup> Schulze, *Simple Stories*, 5. German: “Sie müssen mal versuchen, sich das vorzustellen. Plötzlich ist man in Italien und hat einen westdeutschen Paß. Ich hieß Ursula und Ernst Bodo, Wohnort: Straubing. Unsere Nachnamen habe ich vergessen. Man befindet sich auf der anderen Seite der Welt und wundert sich, daß man wie zu Hause trinkt und ißt und einen Fuß vor den anderen setzt, als wäre das alles selbstverständlich. Wenn ich mich beim Zähneputzen im Spiegel sah, konnte ich noch viel weniger glauben, in Italien zu sein” (17).

<sup>13</sup> In this case, however, gender scholars may wish to proceed with caution. A number of other East Germans in the novel also have American sounding names—in the GDR many parents gave their children Anglo-American names in an apparent (and unusual) attempt to forge a bond with a world they couldn’t physically reach, hence the unlikely popularity of names such as Kevin.



united at last, Cinderella rescued from servitude and exploitation by the handsome Prince.”<sup>14</sup> In keeping with the real demographic change in the six “new” German states, Connie, young and female, eventually leaves Altenburg to work on an English cruise ship. With an apparent mixture of resignation and pride, her parents are of the view that “when other people were still caught up in their illusions,” Connie already knew “just how things would turn out here.”<sup>15</sup>

The novel also includes a deft allusion to the controversial *Rückgabe vor Entschädigung* (“restoration over compensation”) law that saw West Germans who had owned property in East Germany before the Second World War have their property returned to them, rather than being paid compensation. Referring to a group of West Germans drinking with Harry at the hotel, Connie’s colleague whispers to her ““they never forgot what used to be theirs.””<sup>16</sup> The headline of the local paper dated October 25, 1990 is “FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO AUSTRALIA TO CANADA: CLAIMS MADE ON PROPERTY IN ALTENBURG.”<sup>17</sup> As Christa Wolf maintains, GDR citizens didn’t “imbibe . . . with their mother’s milk the belief that private property is the most sacred of all goods,”<sup>18</sup> the result of their naivety being “large-scale title challenges and mass expropriation of the property”<sup>19</sup> that GDR citizens had understood as belonging to the commonwealth. Rubbing salt in the wound, people like Harry Nelson appear essential to the new economy. The

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<sup>14</sup> Ingrid Sharp, “Male Privilege and Female Virtue: Gendered Representations of the Two Germanies,” *New German Studies* 18, no. 1: 87-106 (98), quoted in Cooke, “Beyond a Trotzidentität?” 296.

<sup>15</sup> Schulze, *Simple Stories*, 16. German: “als sich die andern noch Illusionen hingaben. . . wie alles hier kommen würde” (29).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. German: “Die haben nie vergessen, was ihnen gehört” (25).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. German: “Von Südafrika über Australien bis nach Kanada: Ansprüche im Kreis Altenburg” (34).

<sup>18</sup> Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, 40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 297. German: “massenhafte Enteignung und Infragestellung des Eigentums von DDR-Bürgern” (331).

journalist Danny is in trouble with her editor, Christian Beyer, for not having finished an article about Nelson Real Estate, one of the paper's few advertisers. Danny recalls how at her interview Beyer had asked whether she was pregnant or planning to become pregnant, illustrating just how much things have changed—the GDR had one of the highest employment rates for women anywhere in the world.

In frequent film noir-like episodes, many characters in the novel endure incidents (sometimes real, sometimes imagined) that involve being lost and attacked in the darkness. The day may belong to the new supermarkets and banks, but after dark urban warfare rages between neo-fascists and leftist punks. In the course of her work Danny listens to a crank who has invented a story about a home invasion by a group of 13- and 14-year-olds armed with razors in which he is tied up and his wife raped, but quickly realizes that the story is a complete fabrication. Elsewhere in the novel, however, in a very real story, Orlando, a Cuban and fledgling taxi driver, is knifed by neo-Nazi thugs.

Here we might recall Ugrešić's contention from *The Ministry of Pain* that the Yugoslav wars were “something like the national lottery” and that “in such aberrant circumstances winners and losers had to be assessed under new, different criteria.” In the aberrant circumstances of *Simple Stories*, Martin Meurer (son of Renate and Ernst) loses his teaching assistantship in Art History at the University of Leipzig<sup>20</sup> (ironic reward for interrupting his PhD dissertation to

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<sup>20</sup> This “simple story” has strong referents in reality. According to Thomas Abbe, three-quarters of East German academics lost their jobs in the immediate post-unification period and that, of the

participate in the 1989 demonstrations), his driving licence, and then his wife, who is killed in a hit-and-run accident while riding her bike. Although fate has been particularly unkind to Martin Meurer, the group photograph of his university colleagues suggests a collective experience. One of his former colleagues dies when he drunkenly falls down a hole while his building is being renovated—everyone else has moved out. A woman who somehow managed to get a tenure-track job loses it when the “new people” from the West arrive; the beauty of the group is a divorcee with two kids who lives with her mother. As Martin explains to a friend, “[y]ou can forget about all of us, every person in that picture. Nothing ever became of any of us.”<sup>21</sup> By the end of the novel Martin is walking the streets of Stuttgart distributing flyers for a fish restaurant chain. Punched in the face by an angry passerby, who believed him to have leered at his girlfriend (Martin thinks it’s because the man didn’t like his Sachsen accent), Martin remarks how “[n]o one bothered to help . . . Nobody budged.”<sup>22</sup>

Driving a new dark blue Golf hatchback, the “killer” of Martin Meurer’s wife is Dr. Barbara Holitzschek, a neurologist married to an up-and-coming politician (both apparent “winners” in the new time), who, suffering recurring nightmares about the accident, tells others that she ran over a badger. As Cordula Stenger notes, Schulze’s persistent analogies between East German losers and helpless animals are a leitmotif of the novel, the animals splayed flat on the sides of the

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1878 academics employed in the six new German states, only 104 were actually East Germans. See Cooke, *Representing East Germany*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Schulze, *Simple Stories*, 194. German: “Uns kannst du alle miteinander vergessen, alle da auf dem Foto. Aus niemandem is was geworden” (213).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 279. German: “Es hat niemanden gekümmert . . . Keiner hat sich gerührt” (302).

road representing those who have been “run over” as time has accelerated.<sup>23</sup> Driving to the 35<sup>th</sup> birthday of a friend, Tom, Lydia Schumacher and her boyfriend Patrick ominously pass a dead cat and a crow pasted to the blacktop. Both Tom and his wife Billi have inherited small fortunes, and at their renovated farmhouse Tom makes wooden sculptures while Billi looks after their twins and gives flute lessons. Lost in the Thuringian night trying to find the party, Lydia asks Patrick whether he knows anyone else who will, like them, never inherit anything. Exasperated in the darkness, Lydia proffers the line that seems to speak for so many in the novel: “We always do things wrong . . . we do everything wrong.”<sup>24</sup>

After the *Wende*, Christa Wolf wrote that while many West Germans “consider East Germans to have occupied and still to occupy a lower level of civilization,”<sup>25</sup> after the Second World War East Germans themselves were guilty of similar thinking—the barbarian other always lies further to the East. She recalls how

in the spring of 1945, when we were refugees living in barns and attics, ragged and unkempt, we looked on the victorious Soviet troops as barbarians and enjoyed telling each other that they would flush their potatoes down the toilet to wash them. And this in Mecklenburg of all places, where few villages even had any toilets in 1945.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Cordula Stenger, “‘Simple Storys’ aus dem Osten? Wie eine Generation junger Autoren und Autorinnen ihre Erfahrungen in Literatur verwandelt,” in *Rückblicke auf die Literatur der DDR*, eds. Hans Christian Stillmark and Christoph Lehker (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 389-415 (413).

<sup>24</sup> Schulze, *Simple Stories*, 49. German: “Wir machen es immer falsch . . . Alles machen wir falsch” (63).

<sup>25</sup> Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, 295.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 295-6.

The problem is rearticulated in *Simple Stories* when, on the drive home from the party, Lydia and Patrick are pursued by a maniacal tailgater, prompting Patrick's fantasy that "Romanians," "Russians," or "Poles" must be in pursuit. Later Ernst and Renate Meurer have an unusual elliptical exchange about the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, in which Ernst stabs a bread knife in the air illustrating what he'll do when the hordes of Romanians finally invade. On seeing the black damp walls of the cottage where he and Renate will spend the summer, his first association is with "the damn Russians."

The East-West and East-East ruptures and betrayals are mirrored and intensified by those of a private nature. Fuelled by alcoholism, unemployment, small town inertia and ennui, the novel's characters seem condemned to abandon one another. While not every break in every relationship in the novel can be causally ascribed to the events of the *Wende*, these breakdowns occur in its shadow and not somewhere else or in some other time—as Elizabeth Bowen reminds us, "nothing can happen nowhere."<sup>27</sup> A drunken Hanni makes a late-night phone call to Barbara Holitzchek, crying "everything that once was is gone, all those people, gone."<sup>28</sup> A drunken Lydia rebukes Patrick for not being more protective when they were tailgated—"We were each of us on our own. You sat there, and I sat here, that's awful!"<sup>29</sup>—a rebuke echoed by Barbara Holitzchek to her husband Frank. After they are chased home by a group of 14- and 15-year-old neo-Nazi louts, Barbara, drunk and wild, baits him for not taking a beating on her behalf—

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Gillian Tindall, *Countries of the Mind: The Meaning of Place to Writers* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Schulze, *Simple Stories*, 71. German: "Und das schlimmste ist, daß alles, was war, weg ist, die Leute, sie sind weg" (85).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. German: "Jeder war für sich. Du saßt da, und ich saß da, schrecklich!" (70).

“we ran like rabbits, Frank. Like rabbits.”<sup>30</sup> In the novel marital collapse and infidelity are everywhere, the affairs desolate. Danny’s boyfriend Eddie cheats on her with a woman who runs a fast-food kiosk and smells of French Fries—they have sex down a dirt track in the back of a Ford Econovan. Elsewhere, while his wife Marianne is being treated for breast cancer in a Berlin hospital, Dieter Schubert, the victim of communist persecution, pays a student nurse for her company; we later learn he was impotent.

Although Ernst Meurer is a man caught clearly on the wrong side of history—he is responsible for Dieter Schubert spending three years mining soft coal—the compassion with which Schulze depicts his fall from grace suggests that he is also a victim. (At the very least, such an approach avoids the Yugoslav scenario described by Tanja in *The Ministry of Pain* in which the country appears to have been exclusively populated by victims and victimizers who “periodically changed places”). Holed up at home—caught between a coughing neighbour, kids kicking a soccer ball against the side of the building, and abuse from the balconies above as he takes out the rubbish—Ernst ends up in a psychiatric clinic under the care of Barbara Holitzchek, the police having stormed his apartment after he fired a “warning shot” from an air rifle in an attempt to silence the neighbours. We learn from his estranged wife Renate (who has taken both a job and a lover in Stuttgart) that during the 1989 demonstrations Ernst had written a letter to the local paper invoking Hungary in 1956 and Prague in 1968, suggesting that “demonstrations don’t change a thing and provocateurs shouldn’t count on

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 130. German: “Dafür sind wir gerannt wie die Hasen, Frank. Wie die Hasen” (146).

leniency.”<sup>31</sup> The line comes back to haunt him when protesters take to the streets with posters bearing the slogan “No Leniency for Meurer.”<sup>32</sup> Renate explains that in the immediate post-*Wende* period, deserted by his former party colleagues, “[t]hey gave it to Ernst with both barrels, he was easy game. Nobody took his part. Nobody said a word.”<sup>33</sup> “It all happened so fast, and suddenly it was over. Suddenly nobody was interested anymore. The main thing was money and a job, an apartment and a Eurocheck card, getting a handle on new forms and laws.”<sup>34</sup>

In the aberrant post-Wall circumstances, Neugebauer, an apparatchik who once stood shoulder to shoulder with Ernst, has become the owner of an accounting and tax-consulting office, offering tax advice in the “Helpful Hints” section of the same local paper that drags Ernst through the mud. The logic of capitalism and Neugebauer’s ability to make himself indispensable in the new time has made pardon possible—as Renate notes, “[h]e’s intelligent and he rolled up his sleeves, really dug in.”<sup>35</sup> Once a *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (Free German Youth) leader, he now arranges contracts for construction firms and it is in no one’s interests to make waves. As Renate again explains, “[t]hey’re all successful

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 203. German: “daß Demonstrationen nichts ändern und Provokateure nicht mit Milde rechnen dürften” (222).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. German: “Keine Milde für Meurer.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 206. German: “Die haben Ernst nach Strich und Faden fertiggemacht, freigegeben zum Abschluß. Da hat niemand eingegriffen. Alle haben geschwiegen” (225).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. German: “Das ging so schnell, und plötzlich war Schluß. Plötzlich interessierte das keinen mehr. Hauptsache, Geld und Arbeit und Wohnung und EC-Karte und daß man sich auskennt mit Gesetzen und Formularen.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 207. German: “Der ist intelligent und hat sich reingekniet, aber richtig” (226).

businessmen who create the jobs and place the ads. Why should the papers open their mouths? Let bygones be bygones.”<sup>36</sup>

In *Parting from Phantoms*, Christa Wolf writes

[t]he playwright Peter Weiss was quite right when he said that “the gods despise losers”—and of course people despise them too. But often the defeated can see more than a victor, and perhaps can see what is essential, if they are clearheaded, without self-pity and self-indulgence, and capable of learning.<sup>37</sup>

What makes *Simple Stories* so unremittingly bleak is that few—if any—of the characters show themselves capable of this learning, and fewer still prove themselves incapable of self-pity or self-indulgence. Disillusionment never becomes defiance, and instead, with the odd ironic wink, the novel’s protagonists simply reconcile themselves to a world of diminished expectations. Let go from his job selling newspaper advertisements (“polishing doorknobs” as he calls it), Eddie starts reading Stoerig’s *Brief History of Philosophy* but abandons it before reaching Plato, while barely making it to page 80 of Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*. He signs up for six months at the gym but doesn’t make it past week two. When he finally lands a job, it is driving Altenburg vinegar and mustard to Lidl supermarkets in France. Having regularly cheated on Danny with the French Fries woman, Eddie now swears that Danny was the only one he ever loved. Even when characters do display self-awareness they seem powerless to avert impending tragedy. Martin Meurer’s brother Pit ends up marrying the alcoholic

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. German: “Alles erfolgreiche Unternehmer, die Arbeitsplätze schaffen und Anzeigen bringen. Warum solln die Zeitungen den Mund aufreißen? Vorbei ist vorbei” (227).

<sup>37</sup> Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, 22.



Hanni, the two having first met on an evening on which Pit had contemplated raping her. As things unfold, Pit is forced to try and buy the silence of the man (Peter Bertram) who was to have co-raped Hanni, later confessing “I should’ve known a payoff wouldn’t work, that I couldn’t buy my way out, that it’s not about Bertram at all.”<sup>38</sup>

At a conference in Sweden in the summer of 2010 I asked Jens Reich, a key member of the *Neues Forum*, what he made of his fellow civil rights campaigner Joachim Gauck’s declaration cited at the beginning of this chapter (“I have asked myself sometimes, where does the sadness in me come from, after so many victories? We won everything!”). Reich, who appeared tired, replied with an utterance to the effect of “Ah, melancholy is always in fashion.” Laughing along, I then asked him if he felt any sadness for the way things had turned out in reunified Germany. Somewhat more seriously—although perhaps not completely so—he suggested that as long as East German pensioners had the freedom and enough money to go to Cyprus on holiday once or twice a year, then there was no reason for sadness. I’ll never know how much Reich meant what he said. The difficulty, however, is that any criticism of the German reunification process is inevitably countered with this kind of glibness—and it is inevitably voiced by those with far less right to be glib than Reich. In this sense, like Ugrešić’s *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*—the title of which feigns acceptance of the Croatian nationalist wartime demand for the capitulation of

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<sup>38</sup> Schulze, *Simple Stories*, 233. German: “Ich hätte wissen müssen, daß es nicht funktioniert, daß ich mich nicht freikaufen kann, daß es gar nicht um Bertram geht” (253).

the Croatian left—*Simple Stories*, an archaeology of lives and relationships in ruins, is a literary response to glibness that is far from simple.

### 5.3 Clemens Meyer: *Als wir träumten* (2006)

In her laudatio for Clemens Meyer<sup>39</sup> when his 2006 novel *Als wir träumten* (While we were dreaming) won the city of Heidelberg's Clemens-Brentano Prize, Jana Hensel addressed the audience at the award ceremony with the hard-hitting contention:

Almost 20 years since the “Great *Wende*,” the land that was left behind, the land between the Oder and the Elbe, is deeply divided into those who made it after the fall of the Wall, and those who didn't . . . This inner division is one of the greatest tacit understandings of post-*Wende* East German society, a society so fond of recalling the solidarity that existed in the time of the Wall. Clemens Meyer breaks with the consensus, with the tacit silence . . . he writes of those who didn't make it.<sup>40</sup>

In achronological circles Meyer's 500-page novel traces the disintegrating lives of a group of teenage boys in a rundown part of Leipzig from just before the fall of the Wall until the mid-1990s. The boys' *Kinderspiele* (“Children's Games,” the

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<sup>39</sup> Clemens Meyer (1977–) was born in Halle an der Saale and between finishing school and commencing study at the German Literature Institute in Leipzig in 1998 worked as a labourer, furniture mover and security guard, experiences of “real life” that are often said to lend authenticity to his depictions of social outsiders. In addition to *Als wir träumten*, Meyer has published an acclaimed collection of short stories *Die Nacht, die Lichter* (2008; translated as *All the Lights*, London: And Other Stories, 2011), and *Gewalten: Ein Tagebuch* (2010, Acts of violence: a diary”), conceived as Meyer's writer's diary for 2009. Meyer also had a story included in the Dalkey Archive Press anthology Best European Fiction 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Jana Hensel, “Von einem, der übrig geblieben ist,” *Janahensel.com*, <http://www.janahensel.de/cms/jana/hensel/2007/04/29/von-einem-der-ubrig-geblieben-ist/> [accessed August 4, 2011]. German: “Nach beinahe 20 Jahren ‘Großer Wende’ ist das übrig gebliebene Land zwischen Oder und Elbe tief geteilt in jene, die es nach dem Mauerfall geschafft, und jene, die es nicht geschafft haben. Diese innere Teilung gehört zu den wohl größten stillschweigenden Vereinbarungen der ostdeutschen Nachwendegesellschaft, die von sich selbst ja gern erzählt, wie solidarisch man früher, als die Mauer noch stand, miteinander umgegangen ist. Clemens Meyer bricht diesen Konsens, er bricht mit dieser stillschweigenden Vereinbarung . . . indem er von denen erzählt, die es nicht geschafft haben.”

ironic title of the first chapter) begin with stealing beer from the neighbourhood brewery and dancing on the roofs of stolen cars, and inevitably end as “Green Nights,”<sup>41</sup> handcuffed to radiators on the floor of the local police station. From a cell cot in the diegetic present, the narrator, Danie, recalls the “wild times” of the boys’ reign as neighbourhood little kings. The novel’s non-linear narrative underlines the defective “technologies of memory” (c.f. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*), while Danie’s repeated narration of several events—the narrative being slightly different each time—highlights its unreliability.

The figure of the ruin, and moreover, its shadow—absence—are leitmotifs of the novel. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have spent our lives in countries and cities outside the historical spotlight may of course also mourn the lost playgrounds of our childhoods, but Danie and his friends face a situation in which almost *everything* they knew is either disappearing or already gone. While the novel is set in a very specific geography—the Leipzig East neighbourhood of Reudnitz—its landscape of urban and industrial ruin, of absence, is representative of huge tracts of the former East Germany. In the euphoria of German reunification, Helmut Kohl promised East Germans *blühende Landschaften* (“blossoming landscapes”), yet, despite the billions of dollars of renovation and new infrastructure the ghostly phenomenon of *schrumpfende Städte* (“shrinking cities”—not to mention the shocking emptying of the countryside) is as great a marker of the “new reality” as the sparkling rejuvenation of many city and town centres. The built and rural landscape of the

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<sup>41</sup> The joke is that police in Germany wear green uniforms.

former East Germany is as divided into places that have and haven't "made it" as the human population.

Whether it be the tearing down of entire tower block settlements in smaller towns such as Hoyerswerda and Eisenhüttenstadt, or the destruction of the monumental "Palace of the Republic" in central Berlin, the East German landscape is characterised by what Anke Pinkert calls "symbolic marks of erasure" which both shift "the matrix of the individual's relation to the new social and institutional authority" and "continue to surround the GDR past with anxieties, if not shame."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, as Andreas Huyssen put it in 1997 with regard to Berlin:

If, at that confusing and exhilarating time after the fall of the Wall, Berlin seemed saturated with memories, the years since then have also taught us multiple lessons about the politics of willful forgetting: the imposed and often petty renaming of streets in East Berlin that were given back their presocialist, and often decidedly antisocialist, cast, the dismantling of monuments to socialism . . . This was not just tinkering with the communist city text. It was a strategy of power and humiliation, a final burst of Cold War ideology, pursued via a politics of signs, much of it wholly unnecessary and with predictable political fallout in an East German population that felt increasingly deprived of its life history and of its memories of four decades of separate development.<sup>43</sup>

In the ellipsis in the above paragraph, Huyssen mentions "the absurd debate about tearing down the GDR's Palace of the Republic to make room for a rebuilding of the Hohenzollern palace." Yet what Huyssen termed "absurd" in 1997 had barely a decade later already been completed. The asbestos-laced

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<sup>42</sup> Anke Pinkert, "Postcolonial Legacies': The Rhetoric of Race in the East/West German National Identity Debate of the Late 1990s," *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 35, no. 2 (2002): 13-32 (28).

<sup>43</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 53-4.

“Palace” was torn down between 2006 and 2008, and by the spring of 2011 reconstruction of the Hohenzollern palace had begun. In her memoir *Zonenkinder*, Jana Hensel wrote that “our generation is the only continuum in our lives . . . The experiences of the past ten years, and all the friends who shared them, they are our family.”<sup>44</sup> The difficulty is that in Meyer’s novel, it’s not just that almost *everything* is gone; it’s that almost *everyone* has gone.

In the only hitherto published academic study of Meyer’s novel, Frauke Matthes suggests that it “successfully avoids falling into the trap of *Ostalgie* and does not paint a mellow picture of growing up in Leipzig as does Jana Hensel’s work in particular.”<sup>45</sup> The unflattering allusion to Hensel is unfortunate, as Hensel’s and Meyer’s books are better read on a complementary than competitive basis—to appreciate the latter, one need not denigrate the former. Furthermore, the *a priori* assumption that *Ostalgie* is a pejorative is highly problematic in the context of this study.<sup>46</sup> The “children of the Zone” (the “Zone” referring to the Soviet Zone of occupation following the Second World War) in Hensel’s book are, as Hensel notes, “social climbers”<sup>47</sup>: they go to university, spend semesters abroad in France, holiday in Italy, meet boyfriends and girlfriends from Hamburg

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<sup>44</sup> Hensel, *Zonenkinder*, 160-1. German: “Das einzige Kontinuum unseres Leben aber mussten wir selbst erschaffen: Das ist unsere Generation. Nur die Erfahrungen der letzten zehn Jahre und alle Freunde, die sie teilen, bilden unsere Familie.”

<sup>45</sup> Frauke Matthes, “Clemens Meyer, *Als wir träumten*: Fighting ‘Like a Man’ in Leipzig’s East,” in *Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Lyn Marven and Stuart Taberner (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 2011), 89-104 (90).

<sup>46</sup> Somewhat contradicting her pejorative use of the term *Ostalgie*, Matthes contends that, “by contrast to some novels that have emerged in East Germany since the *Wende* . . . *Als wir träumten* does not engage with the trauma caused by a lost ‘home’ that once promised emotional stability. Although Meyer’s characters are looking for a sense of belonging, it is not dependent on a political entity or a state” (96-7). As argued by Boym, Saunders, Ugrešić and others, postcommunist nostalgias are indeed not dependent on a state, but are, rather, personal matters connected with everyday life.

<sup>47</sup> Hensel, *Zonenkinder*, 72. German: “Aufstiegskinder.”

and Hannover. Busy reinventing themselves for the new time, as Hensel writes, “we were the Sons and Daughters of the Losers, mocked by the Winners as Proles, marked with the Smell of Totalitarianism and being Work-Shy. We didn’t plan to stay like that for long.”<sup>48</sup> Meyer’s novel, however, tells a different story. His kids aren’t going anywhere fast. Not to Italy, not to France, not even to Hamburg or Hannover—their transmission into the new time has failed. In *The Ministry of Pain*, Ugrešić’s narrator Tanja talks about herself and her students having arrived too late to complete transmission into the new time—*Als wir träumten* challenges the suggestion that all of those born later necessarily had better chances of making it.

Matthes’s article also begets another significant question: the causal relationship (or lack thereof) between the *Wende* and Danie and his friends’ downward trajectory. Matthes suggests that while the “political changes of 1989 are closely connected with the social changes they experience . . . the *Wende* is not central to the boys’ passage to manhood.”<sup>49</sup> The difficulty is that while the novel’s young protagonists are in no way politically conscious actors, their lives and fates *are* indelibly marked by the post-*Wende* upheavals in East German society, and this cannot *but* affect their “passage to manhood”—or more pointedly, the violence of their passage, and in a number of cases, their non-arrival. While Matthes correctly points out that the timing of the boys’ descent into crime has more to do with the fact that they reach puberty at the time of the *Wende*, the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 73. German: “Wir waren die Söhne und Töchter der Verlierer, von den Gewinnern als Proletarier bespöttelt, mit dem Geruch von Totalitarismus und Arbeitsscheu behaftet. Wir hatten nicht vor, das länger zu bleiben.”

<sup>49</sup> Matthes, “Clemens Meyer,” 91.

coincidental or casual relationship between the two events doesn't necessarily eliminate the causal one.

Meyer's novel is, however, far from clear-cut on the causality of the relationship, and Matthes's claim that "the pre-1989 years appear . . . as a time of innocence"<sup>50</sup> is easily refuted. Rico is first sent to a reformatory two years before the fall of the Wall (for burning his Pioneer scarf and biting the tip off the Pioneer leader's nose); Fred and his brother Silvio are both abandoned by their parents; and in a GDR reformatory Silvio is "given a few too many antidepressants and injected with a few too many tranquilisers."<sup>51</sup> Danie's alcoholic father goes to prison in the time of the GDR (a football-related fight), forcing his mother to lie that he is away at the Baltic Coast for *Weiterbildung* (in-service training). As Hensel notes, "one can't pinpoint the moment when everything threatens to turn sour. There is neither a key scene nor a huge explosion—because it's not like that in life either."<sup>52</sup>

Danie likens the post-industrial ruinscape of Leipzig East to a warzone:

Almost all the buildings one could see from the S-Bahn were run down or crumbling, and even the snow didn't make it any better; it looked like a bunch of guys had gone on an S-Bahn rampage through Leipzig with grenade throwers and machine guns.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 91-2.

<sup>51</sup> German: "ein bisschen zu viele Antidepressiva und Ruhighalte-Spritzen bekommen" (10).

<sup>52</sup> Hensel, "Von einem." German: "kann man dabei den Moment, in dem alles zu kippen droht, nicht ausmachen. Es gibt weder die eine große Szene, noch den einen großen Knall—denn den gibt es auch im Leben nicht."

<sup>53</sup> Meyer, *Als wir träumten*. German: "Fast alle Gebäude, die man von der S-Bahn aus sehen konnte, waren verfallen oder kaputt, und auch der Schnee machte es nicht besser; es sah aus, als hätten jede Menge Typen mit Granatwerfern und Maschinengewehren eine S-Bahn-Spritztour durch Leipzig gemacht" (191).

Among the ruins there are also grassed-over spaces, “symbolic marks of erasure” in Pinkert’s phrase. The factory where Danie and the boys once ran an illegal disco has been torn down to make way for a new petrol station. The only remnant of the time is Thilo the Drinker who now stands guard outside the Shell station, bringing to mind the “surplus” Moldovan soldier Ugrešić’s narrator observes in front of the Soviet barracks next to the “Museum of Unconditional Surrender.” However, complicating the relationship between the factory’s demolition and the building of the service station, Danie admits that the disco closed not because of the advance of western capital, or even the attacks by rival “entrepreneurs,” but because of the drug trade in which the boys themselves were complicit. In one of the many other refractions of the themes of ruins, erasure, and absence (of buildings, people, and time), Danie visits the sandpit he played in with Rico as a child and notices that the tree in which they also used to play in is gone—“[t]hey cut it down a few years ago, because it had become sick and its leaves no longer grew.”<sup>54</sup> Looking for Werner, whose group of anti-fascist punks once helped the boys settle a problem with local skinheads, Danie finds his old squat now with bricked-in windows, the building housing the bar where Werner worked has simply vanished.

Within a year or two of the *Wende* the name of Danie and Rico’s favourite football club has been changed twice, Danie’s teenage comment being “why this all was, we didn’t understand, we believed in Chemie [the original name of their

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. German: “Unseren Baum gab es nicht mehr. Sie hatten ihn vor ein paar Jahren gefällt, weil er krank geworden war und die Blätter nicht mehr wuchsen” (314).



club] and we were Chemie forever.”<sup>55</sup> The boys support a team that no longer exists in a league about to be abolished. The last football game Danie and Rico attend (“Chemie” against “BFC Dynamo,” which has also been renamed—“Dynamo” being a very common name for east European football teams<sup>56</sup>) is another suggestive moment of caesura. In a spate of fan violence, a boy of Danie and Rico’s age is shot dead and their team loses the game 4-1. Danie explains:

We didn’t get promoted to the Bundesliga in this last season of the GDR Premier League, not even to the Second Division, we had to go down to the Northeastern Amateur League . . . We bought ourselves new scarves, but nothing was ever like it was before that Sunday in the year after the Changes, when we played against BFC Dynamo.<sup>57</sup>

Threatened on all sides—by their teachers, their parents, and other gangs—in moving solidarity, Danie and his friends lie, defend, and take beatings for one and other. Paradoxically, it is only when watching Rico and Mark get a hiding from his apartment window that Danie articulates the boys’ pact: “never run, leave no man behind, never give up.”<sup>58</sup> Irrespective of their drinking, drugging, stealing, and fighting, the boys operate under a moral code of their own definition. Surrounded by domestic violence, both Rico and Stefan (also known as “Pitbull”) prove themselves protectors and avengers of women and children. At age 13 Rico gives a classmate’s abusive father a hiding (ironically, Rico had

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<sup>55</sup> German: “Warum das alles so war, verstanden wir nicht, wir glaubten an Chemie, and wir waren Chemie für immer” (328).

<sup>56</sup> Fascinatingly, in 1999 the club actually reverted back to the name Berlin Dynamo, illustrating perhaps that the immediate post-Wall enthusiasm for wiping away every trace of the past had indeed been over-zealous.

<sup>57</sup> German: “Wir stiegen nicht auf in die Erste Bundesliga, in dieser letzten Saison der DDR-Oberliga, auch nicht in die Zweite Liga, wir mussten runter in die Amateur-Oberliga Nordost . . . wir kauften uns auch neue Schals, aber nie wieder war es so wie vor diesem Sonntag, im Jahr nach der Wende, als wir gegen den BFC Dynamo spielten” (340-1).

<sup>58</sup> German: “nie abhauen, niemanden im Stich lassen, nie aufgeben” (296).

originally intended to give the classmate himself a hiding). Overhearing the screams of a drunk beating his girlfriend, Stefan beats him to within an inch of his life (“‘e’s a wifebeater, the worst kind”<sup>59</sup>), ersatz revenge for what his own mother has suffered at the hands of his father. Even when planning to pinch from an old woman whom the boys help by bringing coal up to her apartment, Rico (with no intended irony) informs Danie how they’ll only pinch a little bit: “Not everything, nah, c’mon, we’re men of honour.”<sup>60</sup> Paul, famous for his porn collection, is said to have seen every kind of perversity, but as Danie notes, “[h]e hated child porn. He said he’d cut the dick off anyone he caught doing that stuff.”<sup>61</sup> Although apolitical, Danie and the boys’ greatest battles are against neo-Nazi skinheads, the presence of whom is yet another symptom of a society in ruins, their initials “RR” (“Reudnitzer Rechte”) said to be spraypainted on every third building in Leipzig East.

Danie is frequently depicted as being capable of substantial compassion. He comforts Paul who tearfully admits not having been able to sleep with a woman since he lost his virginity to Anna in an outside toilet some seven years ago, his loss of sexual function awkwardly linked to the loss of everyone around him. “I can’t do it with anyone,” Paul whimpers, “[a]nd the others, the others are all gone. Oh God, this is such fucking shit.”<sup>62</sup> In Danie’s imagined exchange with Mark’s ghost, Mark desperately apologizes for trying to steal money from him to buy heroin. Danie responds, “No. It was the fucking smack . . . it wasn’t you

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<sup>59</sup> German: “‘is ‘n Frauenprügler, unterste Sorte” (85).

<sup>60</sup> German: “‘Nich alles, nee, sind doch Ehrenmänner” (76).

<sup>61</sup> German: “Pornos mit Kindern hasste er. Er sagte, er würde jedem den Schwanz abschneiden, den er bei so was erwischte” (246).

<sup>62</sup> German: “‘Ich kann mit niemandem. Und die anderen, die anderen sind alle weg. Oh Gott, das ist so scheisse” (249).

Mark,”<sup>63</sup> and we learn that in the past Danie had—in his own way—desperately tried to stop Mark using (“If I catch you sticking the needle in, I’ll kill you”<sup>64</sup>). Mark loses his battle with heroin, a tragedy compounded by the fact the Stefan sells him his final fix.

The West appears in the novel as yet another paradigm of absence. Danie imagines an entire episode walking in the local forest with Katja, the class leader with whom he is (at around the age of 13) in love, but at the end of the “dream” admits

[t]here was no farewell . . . She was just gone and she never came back. She used to sit in front of me, but one morning her chair was empty. Frau Seidel said nothing about it and didn’t talk about her, none of the teachers said anything about the empty spaces in our classrooms. We knew in any case that their parents had taken them to the West.<sup>65</sup>

The silent disappearance of school pupils from the classroom is shortly followed by the silent disappearance of teachers. With a child’s confidence, Danie explains: “the teachers didn’t go to the West. As they disappeared from one day to the next, but not all at the same time, we whispered among ourselves: ‘They worked for the Stasi.’”<sup>66</sup> And although the West seems to be able to reach in and affect the boys’ lives, it nonetheless remains well outside their own reach. Danie recalls the stack of cash bet on one of Rico’s boxing matches and jokes that, had he been the

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<sup>63</sup> German: “Nein. War das scheiß Zeug . . . warst gar nicht du, Mark” (52).

<sup>64</sup> German: “Wenn ich dich erwische, wie du dir was reinjagst, bring ich dich um” (54).

<sup>65</sup> German: “Aber es gab keinen Abschied . . . Sie war einfach weg und kam nicht wieder. Sie hatte vor mir gesessen, und ihr Platz war eines Morgens leer. Frau Seidel sagte nichts dazu und sprach auch nicht über sie, kein Lehrer redete viel über die leeren Plätze in den Klassen, aber wir wussten trotzdem, dass die Eltern sie mit in den Westen genommen hatten” (357).

<sup>66</sup> German: “Die Lehrer waren nicht in den Westen gegangen. Als sie verschwanden, von einem Tag zum anderen, aber nicht alle gleichzeitig, flüsterten wir untereinander: ‘Die waren bei der Stasi’” (506).

“postman,” he would have taken off for Paris. The difficulty is that from Leipzig the only direct connections are eastwards to Prague and Poland.

As in all the novels discussed here, Russians make a sad cameo in Meyer’s novel. During one of his reformatory stays Danie encounters two Russians coming off heroin, their faces constantly contorted as if about to cry. Danie asks himself why Russians always look like they’re suffering, remarking that “they had high childlike voices, but their faces . . . their faces, like in an old folks’ home.”<sup>67</sup> With Rico and Mark under attack, Danie thinks about grabbing his big “Russian knife,” which is actually a Kalashnikov bayonet he bought from a departing Russian soldier, the soldier having refused to sell him the Kalashnikov itself.

As in so many literary and cinematic representations of “the Changes” in eastern Europe, in Meyer’s novel the rise of pornography and prostitution are emblematic of the new time. Danie recalls how in the summer of 1990 the owner of the old Palast-Theater starts showing porn flicks. Almost deserted in the *Zonenzeiten* (“the time of the Zone”), the theatre now draws half the neighbourhood. The owner lets Danie and Mark in even though they are only 15—as Danie says, “after the Changes he didn’t care about the regulations.”<sup>68</sup> The theatre doesn’t stay open long: the owner sets it on fire, takes the insurance payout, and heads for the west, leaving the theatre’s burned-out ruins far behind. Elsewhere, a former toyshop is now a sex shop. Danie explains that “the

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<sup>67</sup> German: “Sie hatten hohe Kinderstimmen, aber ihre Gesichter . . . ihre Gesichter, wie im Altersheim” (224).

<sup>68</sup> German: “die Vorschriften waren ihm nach der Wende egal” (53).

shopkeeper was the same, it just sold other kinds of toys now.”<sup>69</sup> Even the swingers’ club Danie and Rico visit near the end of the novel is housed in a villa that used to belong to the Stasi, dramatic exemplification of the rising of one ideology on the ruins of another.

The first brothel in the city opens in the spring of 1990, and at some point in their late teens Danie and Rico meet one of Danie’s first loves, Estrellita (“little star” in Spanish), in a strip bar. The announcer introduces her as having just celebrated her eighteenth birthday, but Rico doubts she is 18—being “inside” so often has seen him lose track of the years. Although Estrellita tries to put a brave face on things, Danie notes that

[s]he still looked pretty, even though something in her face had changed, I just didn’t know what. Back then she just disappeared, and no one knew where she went. Later someone told me that she’d met a guy from the West, some bullshitter who’d spun some line about the good life and all that. Now she was back, and she danced for us.<sup>70</sup>

When Estrellita asks what the others are doing now, Danie replies that not many of the old gang are left. Mark has overdosed, “little Walter” has killed himself driving a stolen car head-on into a tree, and Fred has simply disappeared. Later in the evening Danie sees Estrellita working at a brothel, and it seems that the only stars left in Leipzig East are those he can see in the sky.

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<sup>69</sup> German: “der Verkäufer war noch derselbe, nur dass es jetzt anderes Spielzeug verkaufte” (60).

<sup>70</sup> German: “Sie sah immer noch schön aus, auch wenn in ihrem Gesicht irgendwas verändert war, aber ich wusste nicht, was. Sie war damals einfach verschwunden, war einfach weg gewesen, keiner wusste genau, wohin sie gegangen war. Jemand hatte mir später erzählt, dass sie einen aus dem Westen kennen gelernt hatte, irgendeinen Rumquatscher, der ihr was erzählt hatte, vom schönen Leben und so. Jetzt war sie wieder hier, und sie tanzte für uns” (162).

The only overtly political events of 1989 portrayed in the novel are the Monday Demonstrations: beginning as prayer meetings for peace in Leipzig's Nikolaikirche, the demonstrations soon blossomed into a civil rights movement demanding freedom of travel and free and fair democratic elections, the protestors' famous slogan being *Wir sind das Volk!* ("We are the people!"). Danie and the boys learn of the demonstrations when Walter's mother starts taking him along. He explains: "Monday isn't proper church, it's different, we go marching."<sup>71</sup> Seeing a convoy of police heading into town, the boys are simply concerned about missing out on the action, the most significant comment being, "I saw it on TV, there's heaps of chicks there, crowds of people, you can grab their tits and stuff."<sup>72</sup> Showing the full extent of his political naivety, Mark says that he'll bring along his First of May flag, to which Paul replies "Nah, I don't think that's a go."<sup>73</sup> Still confused, Mark counters that everyone he saw on TV was carrying a flag. Paul tells Mark what his mother has told him—that the marches are for freedom—to which Mark's response is "So what, first of May's all about freedom too!"<sup>74</sup>

As in Schulze's *Simple Stories*, the characters in Meyer's novel seem tragically resigned to their fates, as Rico's character illustrates. Abandoned first by his father (who disappears to the West) and then by his mother, Rico takes up boxing, taking his anger out on those he can. With his gloves on, it is as if he has his father or the Pioneer leader in front of him, and as Danie notes, against this

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<sup>71</sup> German: "Montag ist nicht richtig Kirche, das ist anders, da gehen wir marschieren" (418).

<sup>72</sup> German: "Ich hab's im Fernsehen gesehen, viele Weiber dort, da ist Gedränge, da kannst du denen an die Titten und so" (423).

<sup>73</sup> German: "Nee, ich glaub, das passt nicht" (423).

<sup>74</sup> German: "Na und, beim Ersten Mai geht's auch für den Frieden!" (424).

kind of rage, his opponents have no chance. Yet throughout the novel, Meyer constantly reminds us that there are some scores Rico (and the rest of the boys) will never settle. When Rico loses an amateur bout to another neighbourhood hero sometime in his mid-teens, Danie elegiacally suggests, “[i]t was the time of the great battles, and he had lost them all.”<sup>75</sup> Years later, following a botched bank robbery, Danie urges him to flee—to Berlin, to the Baltic, to Poland—but Rico can only reply, “[t]here’s no point any more . . . there’s nobody left, they’re either gone or dead.” The mix of fatalism and factuality in Rico’s response brings us back to the related series of questions the novel incessantly asks: was any other outcome ever possible? At what point did things go wrong? Is it possible to attribute responsibility or blame? The closest Danie comes to responding is simply to say that

[t]here isn’t a single night I don’t dream about it all, and the memories dance in my head every day, and I rip myself up with the question of why everything turned out as it did. We had a whole heap of fun back then, that’s for sure. But inside us there was this sense of loss and being lost, and I can’t explain it.<sup>76</sup>

#### 5.4 Jáchym Topol: *Sestra* (1994)

The central argument of Rajendra Chitnis’s *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech and Slovak Fiction of the Changes* is that in the first ten years following the fall of the Berlin Wall a significant number of Russian, Czech, and Slovak writers sought to “liberate” literature from its role as

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<sup>75</sup> German: “Es war die Zeit der grossen Kämpfe, und er hatte sie alle verloren” (132).

<sup>76</sup> German: “Es gibt keine Nacht, in der ich nicht von alldem träume, und jeden Tag tanzen die Erinnerungen in meinem Kopf, und ich quäle mich mit der Frage, warum das alles so gekommen ist. Sicher, wir hatten eine Menge Spass damals, und doch war bei dem, was wir taten, eine Art Verlorenheit in uns, die ich schwer erklären kann” (14).

“the servant of social, political and ideological aims.”<sup>77</sup> With specific reference to Czech literature, Chitnis cites a 1995 essay by Jiří Kratochvíl to support his claim:

“After a long time Czech literature is not only free again and rid of all social commitments and national expectations, but also has its ‘generation,’ which is turning its back on both the literature of the 1960s and the official and unofficial literature of the twenty years of occupation. It is a literature which with relish scorns all ideologies, missions and services to the people or to anyone.”<sup>78</sup>

The argument correctly marshalled by Chitnis implies that the events of 1989 effectively disestablished the three dominant modes of writing in communist-era eastern Europe—dissident (*samizdat*), exilic (*tamizdat*), and officially sanctioned literature (the former Yugoslavia being, in all three respects, the inevitable exception). Chitnis’s argument likewise implies that in their attempts to “liberate” literature from the extra-literary purposes it had been called on to serve, writers of what he calls “the fiction of the Changes” took refuge in a kind of *l’art pour l’art* aestheticism, their work best understood as “the personal *plaisir* of the author.”<sup>79</sup> With this in mind, it is of little surprise that in his erudite discussion of Jáchym Topol’s *Sestra* (translated as *City Sister Silver*<sup>80</sup>), Chitnis offers a metaphysical interpretation of the novel centred both on Topol’s narrative technique and the allusions a lay reader might miss. Here my interest is not in challenging the specifics of Chitnis’s reading (which fits the argument of

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<sup>77</sup> Chitnis, *Fiction of the Changes*, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Chitnis, 10.

<sup>79</sup> Pavel Janoušek, quoted in Chitnis, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Regarding the change of title, in a 2010 interview American translator Alex Zucker explained “the word ‘sestra’ has a variety of meanings in Czech, including one’s biological sister, but also nurse and nun. There was no way I could really capture that multiplicity of meanings in English so I decided to combine the names of the [novel’s three] sections [“City,” “Sister,” “Silver”].” See Alex Zucker, interview by Stephen Delbos, *Praguepost.com*, October 10, 2010, <http://www.praguepost.com/blogs/books/2010/10/10/interview-with-translator-alex-zucker-part-23/> [accessed September 16, 2011].



his study perfectly well), but rather in connecting Topol's literary aesthetics with the novel's social and political commentary, aspects Chitnis obviously considered quite secondary (or non-existent). Hence I argue that *City Sister Silver* is not only concerned with the post-1989 ruins of east European literature, but also exemplary of a literature of the (post-1989) east European ruins.<sup>81</sup>

In an instructive preface to the English edition of the novel, translator Alex Zucker writes of the work as "the author's exploration of the way language changed in response to the new reality."<sup>82</sup> When the novel was first published in Czech, it included a special note to readers that the author had set out to "capture language in its unsystematicness and out-of-jointness," the attempt exemplified, as Zucker observes, by "radical fluctuations in grammar, spelling, syntax, and style between the two poles of written (or literary) and spoken Czech not only from scene to scene, but within a single paragraph or sentence,

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<sup>81</sup> As the literary commentariat seldom fails to note, Jáchym Topol (1962–) was born into Czech cultural nobility, his father, Josef Topol, a Czech playwright, poet, and translator of Shakespeare, and his mother, Jiřina Topolová, the daughter of Czech Catholic writer, Karel Schulz. Topol's literary activities began in the late 1970s as lyricist for his brother's band *Psí vojáci* (Dogs of War) and in the early 1980s he became involved in *samizdat* publishing, his first collection of poetry awarded the Tom Stoppard Prize for Unofficial Literature. Bolstering his dissident pedigree, Topol was barred from enrolling at university on account of his father's involvement in dissident politics, and he spent a number of years working in menial jobs. Aged 15 he was a signatory to the Charter 77 human rights declaration, and spent several short spells in prison for both his *samizdat* activities and involvement in smuggling undertaken in conjunction with members of the Polish *Solidarność* movement. At the time of the "Velvet Revolution," Topol was working as a journalist for the independent newsletter *Informační servis*, which later became the investigative weekly *Respekt*. *Sestra*, his first novel, was published in 1994, and in 1995 it received the Egon Hostovský Prize, the Czech Republic's premier literary award. Moreover, it was the only novel from the 1990s to be included in the 100 Greatest Czech Prose Works of the Century, a list compiled by prominent Czech writers and critics. Since *City Sister Silver* Topol has, among other writings, published the novels *Anděl* (Angel, 1995); *Noční práce* (Nightwork, 2001); *Kloktat dehet* (*Gargling Tar*, 2005); a play *Zlatá hlava* (Golden head, 2005); a short story collection *Supermarket sovětských hrdinů* ("Supermarket of Soviet Heroes," 2007); and the novella *Chladnou zemí* ("Chilly land," 2009). Many of these works have been translated into German, French, and Polish, and a handful into English. Both *Anděl* and *Sestra* were made into films.

<sup>82</sup> Topol, *City Sister Silver*, vii.

sometimes even from one word to the next.”<sup>83</sup> As Zucker observes, while such an approach is not necessarily new in Anglophone literature, in Czech, where the boundary between written and spoken language is well-guarded, Topol’s deliberate transgressions were acclaimed as an epochal break in the country’s literature.<sup>84</sup> Topol’s narrator and anti-hero, Potok (Czech for “stream”), puts it plainly: “Czech had exploded along with time.”<sup>85</sup>

At around 500 pages, and with only the loosest of plots, the novel was described by a *New York Times* reviewer as “a picaresque, psychedelic romp through the ‘velvet hangover.’”<sup>86</sup> The novel is divided into the three parts that form the title of the English edition (“City,” “Sister,” and “Silver”) and follows Potok, a 30-something unemployed actor, and his four “droogs,”<sup>87</sup> Bohler, Micka, David, and Sharky, who collectively form “the Organization.” Engaged in all kinds of “byznyz” activities in new Prague, “the Klondike of the Wild East,”<sup>88</sup> the Organization is described by Potok in terms as contradictory as the time in which it was born:

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> American critics, on the other hand, were quick to compare the novel to works by, among others, Anthony Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*), James Joyce (*Finnegans Wake*), Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*), William Burroughs (*Naked Lunch*), and frequently, Irvine Welsh.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 41. Or as Potok explains at another point: “Coincidentally the tongue I use is one of the Czechs, of Slavs, of slaves, of onetime slaves to Germans and Russians, and it’s a dog’s tongue. A clever dog knows how to survive and what price to pay for survival. He knows when to crouch and when to dodge and when to bite, it’s in his tongue. It’s a tongue that was to have been destroyed, and its time has yet to come; now it never will. Invented by versifiers, spoken by coachmen and maids, and that’s in it too, it evolved its own loops and holes and the wildness of a serpent’s young. It’s a tongue that often had to be spoken only in whispers. It’s tender and cruel, and has some good old words of love, I think, it’s a swift and agile tongue, and it’s always happening” (34).

<sup>86</sup> Neil Bermel, “Velvet Evolution,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2001.

<sup>87</sup> In most Slavic languages the word “drug” (and its variants) means “friend” or “comrade.” “Droog” is both phonetic spelling of “drug” and is also used with the same meaning in Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*.

<sup>88</sup> Topol, *City Sister Silver*, 70.

We were brutes and terrific boys, thieves and entrepreneurs, drunks and junkies, artistes and wheeler-dealers . . . low-down and dependable . . . and above all we were a community, don't forget, there was a war raging outside our windows.<sup>89</sup>

Although involved in everything from human and arms trafficking to shady real estate deals to selling a miraculous elixir, Potok and friends, like Danie and his gang from Meyer's novel, have a kind of honour pact, which they refer to as "the Secret." Never fully explicated, the Secret appears to be an *entente* to look out for "small creatures . . . the unfinished ones that can't defend themselves . . . and also children and small dogs."<sup>90</sup> Although the Organization is complicit in the pornography trade, the Secret demands that children not be involved, as this would jeopardize the arrival of "the Messiah,"<sup>91</sup> one of the novel's freewheeling references to Christian mythology. With the implosion of the Organization following an arms deal gone sour (exporting rockets to Libya), the real quest of the novel begins. Potok the picaro sets off on peregrinations through the underbelly of Prague, post-*Wende* Berlin, and the nowherelands of eastern Slovakia in search of the "Sister" (eventually embodied by the torch-singer-cum-prostitute Černá) promised to him by his former lover "Little-White-She-Dog."

Detecting in *Sestra* everything from Jewish, Christian, Oriental and Native American mythologies, to film, European Romantic literature and Czech children's fiction, Chitnis suggests that Topol rejects "realist modes of

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 63; 130.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-3; 88.

portrayal”<sup>92</sup> as aesthetically inadequate to capture the post-1989 upheaval, because realism shuts both writer and reader “within a concrete ‘named’ world.”<sup>93</sup> Again Chitnis cites Janoušek to support his argument, Janoušek contending that Topol

“smash[es] the image of external reality into thousands of pieces and put[s] them back together in a mosaic whose deconstructive order is ordained by the implied author. This author gives precedence, ahead of the quest for great Truth, to a free literary game, which does not allow itself to be tied down by the limits of our everyday present.”<sup>94</sup>

While the novel’s narrative may indeed be shattered, the action surreal (indeed, often psychedelic) and often extremely difficult to follow, individually many of the fragments are almost documentary-like in their realism. Linguistically and narratively Topol’s novel is certainly wild and promiscuous prose, but there are also countless passages in which he appears to have directly heeded Böll’s call from a half a century ago, that—among the ruins—a writer must write of what he sees with his own eyes. In fact, it’s possible Topol had Böll on his mind: the first draft of the novel was written in Böll’s summerhouse in the Westphalian countryside near Köln.

In the post-1989 dystopia of the novel, the idea of the “tribe” is a recurrent motif. Commenting on the nature of human relations in the new (capitalist) time, Bohler, one of Potok’s comrades in the Organization, muses that “the human community’s fallen apart, just a bunch a tribes fightin in the dark . . . allied or

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<sup>92</sup> Chitnis, *Fiction of the Changes*, 110.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

opposed based on commercial considerations.”<sup>95</sup> Postcommunist Prague is, like Meyer’s post-Wall Leipzig, divided into those who’ve made it and those who haven’t. Potok explains, “the ones that couldn’t find their way had to crawl . . . slower and slower, till they perished in time . . . and the ones that had harnessed time broke the others’ backs.”<sup>96</sup> It is a time in which “ideology’s down the crapper, [and] that leaves cash,”<sup>97</sup> with “newly reestablished millionaires’ clubs” emerging surely from the murk, their members now keen on golf rather than soccer.<sup>98</sup>

More than any other novel considered in this study, Topol’s confirms the existence of a “tribe” of east Europeans, whom I have previously referred to as *Trümmerleute* or “people of the ruins.” As Potok notes, “on my wanderings along the way to Europe, I met lots of outcasts. The penitentiaries were interesting. That was nothing for alla those craggy Siberians, heavy-duty mobsters from Katowice an Gdansk, Ceaușescu’s children, or any Albanian!”<sup>99</sup> Having established himself with an apartment and cash, Bohler, an à-la-carte Catholic, turns to missionary work

delousing stray Romanians, returned to the way station of Bohemia from every corner of fucking white man’s Europe, rubbing Dalmatian ointments into Albanian hookers’ legs, swollen from pounding the pavement, and running baths filled with Fiora perfumes for underage Gypsy girls from the worst urban holes of the Wild East.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Topol, *City Sister Silver*, 67-8.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

In Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* the postcommunist flea market was the evocative locus at which the ruins of a former time were peddled and people of the former time gathered. *City Sister Silver* combines this same locus with the recurrent (c.f. Ugrešić, Meyer) topos of prostitution as a tragic flashpoint in post-1989 East-West relations. In the novel postcommunist *Trümmerfrauen* ("fistfuls of Czechs, wagonloads of Romanians, armies of Ukrainians, pastures of Poles, heaps of Hungarians, one gorgeous Jewess, and others"<sup>101</sup>) perform the same work as their "sisters" did for the American occupiers. With Potok having found work as a "mop boy" at a brothel in Berlin, what he "sees" devastatingly contradicts any suggestion that the novel be solely read as Topol's "personal *plaisir*":

Some of the girls, the foolish ones, began to get nostalgic here, dreamin about the petroleum ponds and tractor-filled fields of home. They'd come in search of treasure, but it didn't take em long to rack up a debt the very same size as that chest of sparkling ducats. Housing, heat, meals, makeup, clothes. Protection! The door out of the cage to the golden West slammed shut in their faces. They were under the wheel now.<sup>102</sup>

But most of those whores were slaves. And a lot of em weren't there voluntarily, that's bullshit, and anyone who says so deserves to get his face bashed. Some were obvious victims that would've gotten under the wheel anytime anywhere. Some liked it. Some were chasing the golden dream and refused to give it up . . . And many were forced into it by slaps, poverty, fear. They'd run away from wars, scary streets, factories. Idiotic dads and dangerous lovers. A couple girls there couldn't've been a day over fourteen. They got old fast. Coke and booze and bed. They didn't know anything else. And what else's a slave? . . . The girls got beatings. Whenever they acted up, and sometimes just for the hell of it. So they'd know where they were and what they were worth.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 235-6.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 237

At a flea market somewhere in the hinterlands of eastern Slovakia,<sup>104</sup> the clear-out sale of communist-era bric-a-brac (“tons of Soviet Army surplus, like a smalltime ragpicker’s crazy dream, backpacks and uniform parts all over”<sup>105</sup>) provokes a strangely bittersweet reaction in Potok. On the one hand he can see that it is “hideous junk,” but irrespective of its hideousness, it seems almost worse that it is all about to be replaced with another kind of ideological junk. “This is our last chance to see this stuff,” he tells Černá, “it’s abominable . . . yeah, but I mean I’ve seen it all my life an so’ve you an now it’s gonna be gone . . . I know it’s abominable an lotsa these people’re nothin but dim-witted snot-nosed burglars, but wait’ll they plow it all over with ads.”<sup>106</sup>

Companions to the Vietnamese cigarette sellers of Meyer’s novel, the Laotians who appear in *City Sister Silver* are involved in a dodgy import business with the Organization. Both “tribes” also belong to a different time, part of the defunct Eastern Bloc import of cheap labour from fraternal states in the Second and Third Worlds. In the new time they are victims of neo-Nazi violence, for “after time exploded . . . the hitlers started slithering out.”<sup>107</sup> In Berlin, Topol uses the metaphor of “Kanaks”<sup>108</sup> to refer to an international underclass (largely

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 383. “We were definitely near some border. This was the bottom. It was a mixture, the dregs of Eastern Europe, mainly Russian, Polish, and Romanian hucksters. But the kind that had nowhere else to go.” Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk goes in search of the exact location in his previously-cited travelogue *On the Road to Babadag* (see 203-5) and names it as Ubla, which is indeed in eastern Slovakia, right on the Ukrainian border.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 385-6.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>108</sup> Etymologically the invariable term “Kanak” refers to the indigenous Melanesian inhabitants of New Caledonia, the word derived from the Hawaiian “kanaka maoli,” the appellation early European settlers gave to all Pacific islanders. The similar term “Kanakas” refers to Pacific islanders who performed indentured labour in many British colonies (and elsewhere) in the 19th century. In German the term “Kanake” (or “Kanakaner”) was originally used by German seamen in the South Pacific to refer to their local colleagues. Later the term became a derogatory epithet applied to immigrants to Germany with a southern European appearance, and in more recent

consisting of “eurotrash . . . on the way back to Europe”<sup>109</sup>), who among themselves speak an improvised Esperanto, thus providing another opportunity for Topol’s linguistic adventures. The “new man” of the east European ruins is a Ukrainian named Vasil, his body deformed by Chernobyl, his papers “issued in a city that didn’t exist, in a region that’d changed names, in a country that’d split up . . . signed by dead people.”<sup>110</sup> When Potok finally returns to Prague at the end of the novel, his building has been demolished and replaced by “Hotel Evropa” (“yeah, that’s original” he remarks). The receptionist tells him that he’s missed his chance to claim compensation, and that like all other previous tenants who have failed to do so, he has been relocated to the City Dump. He belongs to a tribe of people for whom space can literally only be found on a scrap heap.

In a declaration critical to the present study as a whole, Potok declares that “it was the time after time exploded and we lived in the ruins.”<sup>111</sup> The most significant ruin trope in *City Sister Silver* is that of time. Potok refers to the post-1989 period as the years after “time exploded”<sup>112</sup> (also referred to as “the explosion of time,” “the years 1,2,3,” and “the years when time broke into a run,”<sup>113</sup>), a clear invocation of a *Stunde Null* or “zero hour.” In the novel the poet Jícha, who, as Chitnis notes, is “a self-parodic past incarnation of Topol”<sup>114</sup> is

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decades was a term of abuse for Turkish immigrants. Like young urban African-American males who reclaimed the word “nigger,” a similar phenomenon occurred in the late 1980s among urban Turkish youth, who proudly adopted “Kanakanak” as a self-appellation. As for Potok’s professed desire to write the first novel written in “Kanak,” this honour actually belongs to German Turkish author Feridun Zaimoğlu, who published the novel *Kanak Sprak* (“Sprak” being pigeon for “Sprache” or “language”) in 1995.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 229-30.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 42; 73.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 109.



killed off. According to Potok, Jícha owed his fame to his underground past, and the fact that his one and only poetry collection (*I Love You Under the Horologe of Insanity*<sup>115</sup>) was “bought up by silly highschool girls and their depraved female teachers.” Potok suggests that if Jícha could write a book, then he could too, but that his book would be written “on the body of a changed world, in the ruins of the former time.”<sup>116</sup> The difficulty, however, is that in the new time those former high-school girls have “turned old and gruff and lived their own poetry now,” while “the new high school girls didn’t even read.”<sup>117</sup>

In what is perhaps sly metacommentary on the language of the novel, Potok maintains that were he to write a book, he would write his book in “Kanak”: “I’d open the first glorious chapter of Kanak literature! I’ll write the book in raw post-Babylonian, the way I heard it on my wanderings through the past, present, an future.”<sup>118</sup> And in what is both a comment on the deficiencies of new time, and also sly metacommentary on the difficulty of reading Topol’s novel, he remarks that

nowadays it’s fashionable to say: I don’t have time, it makes people feel tremendously important that they don’t have time, that they’re workin, makes em feel almost American, sittin in those meetings a theirs tryin to solve the unsolvable an not looking around anymore . . . they wanna look like the people from the TV series, pissed-off professionals, success, dude, satellites, fast cars, five blondes, etc., get it? Yeah, whenever I’m in a pub I ask: D’you read War and Peace an Gilgamesh yet, or how bout The Man Without Qualities or Welzl the Eskimo, you can get through it in a night . . .

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<sup>115</sup> As Chitnis notes, the title is an absurd variation on the title of Topol’s own 1991 collection *Miluju tě k zbláznění* (“I Love You to the Point of Madness”), while Jícha’s journalist endeavours have their referents in Topol’s own reporting on difficulties faced by Vietnamese immigrants, those “left over” from the old time. See *Fiction of the Changes*, 110.

<sup>116</sup> Topol, *City Sister Silver*, 243.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

yeah, you oughta see the look they get on their faces, like: That's thick! I don't have time for that . . . these days! Isn't there a movie of it? Like the Bible? Yep, when someone tells me, all dignified and lofty, or with a drained look: I don't have time, I hear the rattle of the spit an shudder for the fate of humanity . . . they wanna be like machines, like slaves hitched to the clock, an the only result is an increase in the number of zombie varieties.<sup>119</sup>

In keeping with the novels by other writers considered in this study, the representations of “the West” or Westerners tend to at least be implicitly negative. The Austrians who visit the only proper restaurant at the flea market look from behind the *cordon sanitaire* of their car windows, “pretty sad about their strategic location. Europe just couldn't quite unify somehow.”<sup>120</sup> The tens of thousands of Americans who have suddenly shown up in Prague are suspected of being “just a buncha half an quarter henry millers,” while the only useful American is one who knows “how to make the metal flow.”<sup>121</sup> In terms of economics, western capital appears poised like “hounds at the border”<sup>122</sup>; in terms of morality, an intellectual warrioress such as Susan Sontag is ridiculed as “Sontrag”; even in the realm of “Kulchur,” a group of sucker eastern literati are played by their unidentified Western hosts when in mid-winter they are invited to a writers' retreat hosted in a summer artists' colony—and they all freeze. (“We were idiots. Idiots. East bloc idiots. Toss in a bone!”<sup>123</sup>) Elsewhere, the departure of the East Germans from Prague in September 1989—near end of the old regime—seems to signal the impending arrival of a new one, and just how things are going to be:

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 174.

A hand reached out one of the bus windows holding a can of Coke, a German no longer squatting on the cold cobblestones, handing down from on high the shiny greeting of capitalism. All of a sudden three boys were hopping up and down on the spot, jostling for position, the biggest one snagged the can, stuck it under his jacket, and bolted.<sup>124</sup>

Unlike the novels of Ugrešić and Schulze, Topol's novel contains considerable venom towards communism, alternately referring to it as "the dragon," "the Monster," and "the era of the Sewer,"<sup>125</sup> with Topol also pointing his finger at the complete absence of lustration of those who committed communist-era crimes.<sup>126</sup>

Chitnis concludes his study with the suggestion that it was not until the late 1990s that the Czech (and Russian and Slovak) writers of "the fiction of the Changes" were "again 're-engaging' literature with the external world."<sup>127</sup> In the case of Topol's novel, the literary world it creates cannot be extricated from the external world that it represents. Any exclusively "literary" reading must surely involve a game of blind-man's-bluff, if not an impersonation of the statue of the three monkeys. Given the thesis of Andrew Wachtel and others on east European literature's new social irrelevance post-1989, and Chitnis's and Konrád's suggestions regarding its radical depoliticisation, my discussion of *City Sister Silver* is confronted with a significant anxiety. As outlined in Chapter Two, during the Cold War the most common criticism by east European writers about the western reception of their work was that it was being read not for its aesthetic or

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 17; 25; 33.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 167.

literary value, but as *reportage* from behind the Iron Curtain. They pointed to a division of labour in the literary republic in which western writers were free to write about marital infidelity, the suburban abyss, and *taedium vitae*, while they, in Kiš's phrase, had to stick to "politico-exotico-Communistski themes."<sup>128</sup> In this light, my discussion may well turn Topol's novel into little more than *reportage* from the New Europe. But as offences against literature go, pretending (out of shyness?) that post-1989 literature from eastern Europe has had nothing to "say" about the events of the past twenty years appears to me far worse.

### 5.5 Milan Kundera: *L'Ignorance* (2002)

With the exception of spectacular exilic failures such as Bertolt Brecht, who returned to the German Democratic Republic as soon as conditions were favourable, literary history inevitably—at least post-facto—registers the fates of literary exiles as triumphant. Eliding the years of material, physical, and emotional struggle, such histories cast even those known to have truly suffered as victors, their work indelibly inscribed on the palimpsest of literary history, their presence an apparent mocking of those who forced them abroad in the first place. Having endured sustained attack from writers of the *innere Emigration*, Thomas Mann towers above those who tried to oust him from the German *Kultur*. Officially "shunned" in their homelands, the triumvirate of Miłosz, Brodsky, and Solzhenitsyn used their exile to bend the ear of the West in a way the regimes that they had abandoned or been expelled by never could. Even Kundera, on whose 2002 novel *Ignorance* this chapter focuses, has had the last

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<sup>128</sup> Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 77.

laugh on his heterogeneous Czech critics by becoming the most present Czech writer in the western literary imagination, a position shared by Dubravka Ugrešić vis-à-vis Croatia and Croatian literature. The somewhat tragicomic irony of this situation is of course that Kundera and Ugrešić appear as unhappy about their status as “national representatives”<sup>129</sup> as their respective home milieux, eager as ever to preserve distinguished traditions of equating emigration with treason.

Nataša Kovačević suggests that in both *Slowness* (1993) and *Ignorance*, Kundera “uncharacteristically affirms Czechoslovakia’s communist past, trying to reconsider its utopian promise.”<sup>130</sup> In its succinctness, the assertion hints not only at the decades of controversy surrounding Kundera’s engagement on behalf of “the kidnapped countries” of central Europe, but also at his contentious position as an exiled east European writer in the West.<sup>131</sup> While my reading of

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<sup>129</sup> As indicated elsewhere in this study, Ugrešić has on multiple occasions rejected post-independence Croatia as her homeland, as she has any notion of being a “Croatian” writer. Kundera, on the other hand, has always insisted his one true homeland is “Bohemia,” and has for decades described himself as a “Franco-Czech” writer. An apparent reference to the Kingdom of Bohemia, “Bohemia” is Kundera’s sentimental nickname for the Czech lands. He explains, “I never use the word [Czechoslovakia] in my novels, even though the action is generally set there. This composite word is too young (born in 1918), with no roots in time, no beauty, and it exposes the very nature of the thing it names: composite and too young (untested by time). It may be possible in a pinch to found a state on so frail a word, but not a novel. That is why, to designate my characters’ country, I always use the old word ‘Bohemia.’ From the standpoint of political geography, it is incorrect (my translators often bridle), but from the standpoint of poetry, it is the only possible name.” *Art of the Novel*, 126.

<sup>130</sup> Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism*, 82.

<sup>131</sup> For a useful introduction to Czech accusations that in exile Kundera began “writing for foreigners” see Pichová’s previously cited article “Milan Kundera and the Identity of Central Europe” and the previously cited “conversation” between Philip Roth and Ivan Klíma in Roth’s *Shop Talk*. For evidence that Kundera continues to inflame scholarly passions, see Tim West’s recent attack on Kundera for his alleged lack of commitment to the Prague Spring, “Destiny as Alibi: Milan Kundera, Václav Havel and the ‘Czech Question’ after 1968,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 87, no. 3 (July 2009): 401-28, and Joseph Benatov’s recycling of old—rather provincial—accusations that Kundera’s exilic fiction involves exoticised representations of eastern Europe tailored for western readers’ expectations and easy consumption, “Demystifying the Logic of *Tamizdat*: Philip Roth’s Anti-Spectacular Literary Politics,” *Poetics Today* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 107-132.

*Ignorance* occasionally overlaps with Kovačević's explicitly postcolonial reading, with reference to Kundera's communist-era fiction published in exile, it contrarily suggests that the novel's fictional representations of communism, and its scepticism towards western attitudes and intentions towards eastern Europe, are more consistent with than "uncharacteristic" of Kundera's literary output. More importantly, however, in the context of a post-1989 version of *Heimkehrerliteratur* ("returnees' literature"), the reading that follows is interested in Kundera's insistent deheroization of the (communist-era) exilic experience and his equal insistence on the apparent impossibility of exilic return. In an essay from his 2005 collection *The Curtain*, Kundera notes how early in his time in France he was seen as "wrapped in an aura of respectable sadness," the aura lit by grand words such as "totalitarianism," "persecution," and "resistance."<sup>132</sup> While Kundera's tragic fate as a banned and exiled writer may have been wonderful material for western European and North American feuilleton writers wanting to make him a *cause célèbre*, a champion of western democracy, his fiction has always been more nuanced. As noted earlier, the narratorial voice of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* reminds us that when the communists took power in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, they did so "not in bloodshed and violence, but to the cheers of about half the population" and that "the half that cheered was the more dynamic, the more intelligent, the better half."<sup>133</sup> In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the artist Sabina, having fled to Switzerland, refuses to wear the "halo of misfortune" well-meaning westerners place above her. Infuriated by seeing a picture of herself in an exhibition

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<sup>132</sup> Kundera, *The Curtain*, 53-54.

<sup>133</sup> Kundera, *Laughter and Forgetting*, 8.

catalogue in Germany superimposed with barbed wire and accompanied by a biography that reads “like the life of a saint or a martyr,” she is asked by her hosts whether she means to say that modern art isn’t persecuted under communism. She responds with a line that one could well imagine in the mouth of Kundera himself: “My enemy is kitsch, not communism!”<sup>134</sup>

In his most recent collection of essays, *Encounter*, Kundera again takes up the cartography of exile in a short essay on Franco-Czech literat Věra Linhartová. He remarks that (communist-era) exile “has made everyone extremely sensitive to the fate of people forced out of their own homelands,” maintaining that “[t]his compassionate sensitivity has befogged the problem of exile with a tear-stained moralism, and obscured the actual nature of life for the exile.”<sup>135</sup> As Kundera has it, banishment is often “into a liberating launch” toward what Linhartová calls “another place, an elsewhere, by definition unknown and open to all sorts of possibilities.”<sup>136</sup> Endorsing Linhartová’s position, Kundera rhetorically asks why the fall of communism failed to spur almost any of “the great émigré artists” to hurry home and “celebrate the ‘Great Return’ in their native lands,”<sup>137</sup> a question he asked of the protagonists of *Ignorance* a decade earlier. The question is a good one: Kundera offers only Zdena and (the late) Josef Škvorecký, whom he notes “visit Prague from time to time,” before returning to “the homeland of their exile,”<sup>138</sup> yet other examples abound. Of the “rock star” exiles such as Miłosz, Brodsky, Solzhenitsyn, or Kundera himself, only Solzhenitsyn made a “Great

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<sup>134</sup> Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 52.

<sup>135</sup> Milan Kundera, *Encounter*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 103.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Kundera, *Encounter*, 121.

Return” home—a return that ended in the farce of him becoming a failed television talk show host. With regard to literary, cultural, and intellectual emigration during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the general trend of non-return is equally marked.<sup>139</sup>

*Ignorance* narrates the first post-*Wende* visits “home” of Irena and Josef, widowed Czech émigrés who, following the failed Prague Spring, separately chose the uncertainty of life in emigration over the certainties of Gustáv Husák’s Czechoslovakia.<sup>140</sup> Irena’s experience of emigration in France mirrors that of Sabina in Geneva and that described by Kundera himself. She recalls that when she and her family arrived in Paris, the French, well informed that “Stalinism is an evil and emigration is a tragedy,”<sup>141</sup> simply sought confirmation of this *a priori* expertise and dutifully pinned a badge of suffering to her chest. When communism surprisingly implodes twenty years later, Irena’s failure to enact what a friend spectacularly dubs “her Great Return” results in mutual disappointment: her friends see her non-return as a refusal to confirm the

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<sup>139</sup> Although they are all regular visitors to their new-old homelands, ex-Yugoslav writers such as Ugrešić, David Albahari, Aleksandar Hemon, Dževad Karahasan, Bora Ćosić, and Boris Buden have maintained permanent residences in the diasporic cities of western Europe and North America, as have the actor Rade Šerbedžija and actress Mira Furlan. Other writers such as Slavenka Drakulić and Slobodan Šnajder appear to have more or less resettled in Croatia, although both spend extended periods of time abroad. The elderly Predrag Matvejević recently returned from Paris to see out his days in Zagreb, while film director Emir Kusturica has notoriously returned not to his hometown of Sarajevo, but to the village of “Drvengrad/Kustendorf,” which he built as a monument to his own ego in a remote region of central Serbia. (See the title essay of Ugrešić’s *Karaoke Culture*, 47-55/*Napad na minibar*, 355-63.)

<sup>140</sup> For an elegant consideration of the novel’s exilic poetics see Fiona Doloughan, “The Myth of the Great Return: Memory, Longing and Forgetting in Milan Kundera’s *Ignorance*,” in *Creativity in Exile*, ed. Michael Hanne (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2004), 142-150.

<sup>141</sup> Kundera, *Ignorance*, 169. French: “le stalinisme est un mal et . . . l’émigration est une tragédie” (157).



suffering they have bestowed on her, and Irena is upset “because . . . I’d thought they loved me not for my suffering but for my self.”<sup>142</sup>

As in his other fiction, in *Ignorance* Kundera uses a mythic intertext—this time the *Odyssey*—to introduce problems of nostalgia, homesickness, and exilic return, and indeed Odysseus’ nostalgia for and return to Ithaca frame the problems of Irena and Josef. Kundera’s reading of the *Odyssey* reveals a strange contradiction: those that remember are immune from nostalgia (the Ithacans remember much about Odysseus but are never nostalgic for him), while nostalgia is the flipside of amnesia (in the twenty years he is away Odysseus forgets almost everything about Ithaca, his nostalgia increasing in direct proportion to his forgetting). Like Odysseus, Irena and Josef wait in vain for their countrymen to finally ask questions about their lives in exile and, like Odysseus, it is only on returning to their homeland that they realise that—to use the title of another Kundera novel—*Life Is Elsewhere*. Both soon realise that denied the opportunity to speak of their lives abroad, these lives will sooner or later become irretrievable. Irena imagines telling her friend Sylvie:

“I could go back and live with them, but there’d be a condition: I’d have to lay my whole life with you, with all of you, with the French, solemnly on the altar of the homeland and set fire to it. Twenty years of my life spent abroad would go up in smoke, in a sacrificial ceremony. And the women would sing and dance with me around the fire, with beer mugs raised high in their hands. That’s the price I’d have to pay to be pardoned. To be accepted. To become one of them again.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid. French: “j’avais pensé qu’ils m’aimaient non pas pour ma souffrance mais pour moi-même” (158).

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 45. French: “je pourrais vivre à nouveau avec eux, mais à condition que tout ce que j’ai vécu avec toi, avec vous, avec les Français, je le dépose solennellement sur l’autel de la patrie et que j’y mette le feu. Vingt ans de ma vie passés à l’étranger se changeront en fumée au cours d’une cérémonie sacrée. Et les femmes chanteront et danseront avec moi autour du feu avec des

With Irena's story, Kundera sets out to undermine the myth of exile as synonymous with heroic misfortune, and in doing so questions the way "westerners" tailor lives and fates for "easterners" while allowing themselves far more flexible designs for life. Shortly before the fall of the Wall, Irena's new partner Gustaf, a Swede, delights in informing her that his firm intends to open an office in Prague, "her city."<sup>144</sup> Sensing his resentment when she disabuses him of his *idée fixe* idea that Prague is still "her city," Irena realizes that he too has fallen in love with his own tragic projection of her. What upsets her is that Gustaf has a Swedish hometown he hates and to which he never wants to return, yet "everyone applauds him as a nice, very cosmopolitan Scandinavian who's already forgotten all about the place he comes from."<sup>145</sup> And so, following a visit to Paris by her domineering mother Irena finds herself thanking God that "[t]he police barrier between the communist countries and the West is pretty solid,"<sup>146</sup> and wondering whether emigration wasn't just an illusion of misfortune "suggested by the way people perceive an émigré." Struck by the paradox that "[t]he implacable forces of history that had attacked her freedom had set her free,"<sup>147</sup> Irena offers an uncanny echo of Tanja's observation in *The Ministry of Pain* that while the Yugoslav wars represented great loss for many, for others they were a

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chopes de bière dans leurs mains levées. C'est le prix à payer pour que je sois pardonnée. Pour que je sois acceptée. Pour que je redevienne l'une d'elles" (47).

<sup>144</sup> The name Gustaf is almost certainly an allusion to Gustáv Husák who in April 1969 with Soviet backing replaced the liberal Alexander Dubček as first secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and from 1975-1989 served as president of Czechoslovakia. As noted in my discussion of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* Kundera refers to Husák, one of Moscow's most loyal allies, as "the president of forgetting."

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 24. French: "tout le monde l'applaudit comme un sympathique Scandinave très cosmopolite qui a déjà oublié où il est né" (28).

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 25-6. French: "La barrière policière entre les pays communistes et l'Occident est . . . assez solide" (29).

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 23. French: "Les forces implacables de l'Histoire qui avaient attenté à sa liberté l'avaient rendue libre" (27).

perfect alibi “to slough off an old life and start again.”<sup>148</sup> This deheroization of exile is given a further iteration in the depiction of Josef’s decision to leave Czechoslovakia: “he was alone, divorced, childless, free. He reflected that he had only one life and that he wanted to live it somewhere else.”<sup>149</sup>

When Irena does finally return “home,” like Josef she encounters a homeland that has become foreign, and in this sense their Great Returns are in fact *Heimkehr in die Fremde*<sup>150</sup>—a return to a home that has become strange. The only place she does feel comfortable is walking the narrow tree-lined streets away from the town centre, “the Prague born at the turn of the previous century, the Prague of the Czech lower middle class, the Prague of her childhood.”<sup>151</sup> This Prague, however, stands in direct contrast to what she calls “the Prague of the postcards . . . the Prague of tourists and whores, the Prague of restaurants so expensive that her Czech friends can’t set foot in them, the belly-dancer Prague writhing in the spotlight, Gustaf’s Prague.” Exemplifying just how alien this new postcommunist Prague has become, she coins new names for the city, adding different foreign suffixes to Gustaf’s name—“Gustaftown. Gustafville. Gustafstadt. Gustafgrad.”<sup>152</sup> In the wake of the Prague Spring, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being’s* (anti-)hero Tomáš notes the erasure not only of Czech street names, but also the Czech names of hotels, cinemas, and cafes, all replaced with names from

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<sup>148</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, 7. Croatian: “da se odbaci stari život i započne novi” (13).

<sup>149</sup> Kundera, *Ignorance*, 68. French: “il était seul, divorcé, sans enfants, libre. Il s’était dit qu’il n’avait qu’une seule vie et qu’il voulait la vivre ailleurs” (67).

<sup>150</sup> The title of a 1949 novel by Walter Kolbenhoff.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. French: “cette Prague néé vers la fin du siècle passé, la Prague de la petite bourgeoisie tchèque, la Prague de son enfance” (125).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 136. French: “la Prague des cartes postales . . . la Prague des touristes et des putains, la Prague des restaurants si chers que ses amis tchèques ne peuvent pas y mettre les pieds, la Prague danseuse se tortillant sous les projecteurs, la Prague de Gustaf” (128).

Russian history and geography.<sup>153</sup> In *Ignorance*, in the wake of Europe's "reunification," Irena remarks on the new Prague's abundance of English signs and labels, the ubiquity of spoken English (especially for business), and the relegation of Czech to little more than a background murmur. During their respective exiles in America and Argentina, Milosz apparently wrote a letter to Gombrowicz that began "[i]f, in a hundred years, our language still exists,"<sup>154</sup> yet in post-communist Prague (as, one assumes, in postcommunist Warsaw), the linguistic exterminator is not Russian, but English.

Recalling Tanja and her students' bewilderment in *The Ministry of Pain* at the newly-established titular languages of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, Potok's confusion with the new Czech in *City Sister Silver*, and the incomprehension the new language of capitalism suffers upon Ingo Schulze's hapless cast of characters in *Simple Stories*, in *Ignorance* Josef also struggles to reconcile himself with apparent changes to his mother tongue:

What happened to Czech during those two sorry decades? Was it stresses that had changed? Apparently. Hitherto set firmly on the first syllable, they had grown weaker; the intonation seemed boneless. The melody sounded more monotone than before—drawling. And the timbre! It has turned nasal, which gave the speech an unpleasantly blasé quality. Over the centuries the music of any language probably does change imperceptibly, but to a person returning after an absence it can be disconcerting: bent over his plate, Josef was listening to an unknown

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<sup>153</sup> "When Tomas looked back at the hotel, he noticed that something had in fact changed. What had once been the Grand now bore the name Baikal. He looked at the street sign on the corner of the building: Moscow Square. Then they took a walk through all the streets they had known, and examined all their names: Stalingrad Street, Leningrad Street, Rostov Street, Novosibirsk Street, Kiev Street, Odessa Street. There was a Tchaikovsky Sanatorium, a Tolstoy Sanatorium, a Rimsky-Korsakov Sanatorium; there was a Hotel Suvorov, a Gorky Cinema, and a Café Pushkin. All the names taken from Russian geography, from Russian history." Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness*, 161-2.

<sup>154</sup> Quoted in Kundera, *The Curtain*, 33.

language whose every word he understood.<sup>155</sup>

For Irena, returning to Prague to live with Gustaf would require her to give up her linguistic dominance over him in French (a language Gustaf has never mastered) and accept a subordinate position in their new English-based relationship. Like Linhartová, who wrote, “[s]o I chose the place where I wanted to live, but I have also chosen the language I wanted to speak,”<sup>156</sup> Irena’s facility in French is another bearer of a hard-fought independence she is reluctant to surrender to any “Great Return.”

Svetlana Boym writes how “Kundera’s immigrant women are never satisfied by their erotic encounters with ‘progressive men’” and muses whether this might be accounted for by Kundera’s “jealousy toward his beloved heroines.”<sup>157</sup> Like Sabina’s Swiss lover Franz in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Gustaf embodies the naïve and progressive Western man, but in place of Franz’s earnestness, Gustaf is defined by an apparent superficiality and stupidity. In an ironic gesture Irena buys Gustaf one of the new Prague’s most ubiquitous souvenirs, a t-shirt printed with “Kafka was born in Prague” on the chest. Playing along with what he thinks is a joke, he puts it on, beaming, oblivious to the fact that Irena really has come to see him as a moronic tourist. In this way Gustaf personifies the western

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<sup>155</sup> Kundera, *Ignorance*, 54-5. French: “Que s’était-il passé avec le tchèque pendant ces deux pauvres décennies? Était-ce l’accent qui avait changé? Apparemment. Jadis fermement posé sur la première syllabe, il s’était affaibli; l’intonation en était comme désossée. La mélodie paraissait plus monotone qu’autrefois, traînante. Et le timbre! Il était devenu nasal, ce qui donnait à la parole quelque chose de désagréablement blasé. Probablement, au cours des siècles, la musique de toutes de langues se transforme-t-elle imperceptiblement, mais celui qui revient après une longue absence en est déconcerté: penché au-dessus de son assiette, Josef écoutait une langue inconnue dont il comprenait chaque mot” (55-6).

<sup>156</sup> Quoted in Kundera, *Encounter*, 104.

<sup>157</sup> Boym, *Nostalgia*, 242.

contribution to what Kundera outlines in another essay as the “restoration of a capitalist society with everything cruel and stupid that involves, with the vulgarity of crooks and parvenus.”<sup>158</sup>

To those who placed Kundera on an anti-communist pedestal (a position of impotence, we might note) during the Cold War, this unexpected “anti-capitalist” rhetoric is likely to be surprising and confusing, even deceitful. But all of the passages of *Ignorance* related to East-West relations underline a broader misunderstanding between “dissident” east European writers and many of their champions in the West. Writers such as Kundera appear to have broken a contract they never signed—one that stated that they would be grateful when communism fell and enthusiastic about whatever came afterwards. Irena’s friend Milada asks whether she has noticed “how after forty years of communism, the bourgeoisie landed on its feet again in just a few days,” how after a forty-year interregnum their sons and grandsons have “taken over the banks, the newspapers, the parliament, the government.”<sup>159</sup> Irena replies, “[y]ou really still are a communist,”<sup>160</sup> to which Milada responds, “[t]he word doesn’t mean a thing anymore. But it’s true I am still a girl from a poor family.”<sup>161</sup>

In the novel’s contrapuntal plot involving Josef, Kundera explicitly links what György Konrád called the “forward march” of *embourgeoisement* or

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<sup>158</sup> Kundera, *The Curtain*, 26.

<sup>159</sup> Kundera, *Ignorance*, 164. French: “Tu as vu comment la bourgeoisie, après quarante ans de communisme, s’est retrouvée en quelques jours? . . . ils occupent les banques, les journaux, le parlement, le gouvernement” (153).

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. French: “Mais vraiment, tu es toujours restée communiste” (153).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. French: “Ce mot ne veut plus rien dire. Mais il est vrai que je suis toujours restée une fille de famille pauvre” (153-4).

*Verbürgerlichung* with the forward march of globalization and concomitant loss of national sovereignty.<sup>162</sup> Josef suggests to a friend that the Soviet empire crumbled because it could no longer restrain aspirations to national independence, yet having won their freedom these newly “free” nations appear less able than ever to regulate their own economies, set their own foreign policy, let alone chose their own advertising slogans. Exemplifying this is Josef’s understanding of a giant new billboard featuring a white hand and a black hand clasped together, accompanied by an acronym promising “security” and “solidarity.” (With a small leap of the imagination it is conceivable that Josef is in fact looking at an advertisement for the United Colours of Benetton.) The billboard reminds him of the propaganda murals of Russo-Czech brotherhood, the difference between the new billboard and old murals being that Russian hands, however detested, were actually a part of Czech history, while “[i]n this country people hardly knew that blacks even existed.”<sup>163</sup> Josef goes on: “No doubt about it, the mural was painted after 1989 when the country took up the slogans of the new age: brotherhood of all races; mingling of all cultures; unity of everything, of everybody.”<sup>164</sup> Leaving aside whether there is an underlying racism in Josef’s indignation, understood as anger at a new kind of economic colonisation, Josef’s observations reiterate a claim Günter Grass put rather more elegantly in his 1992 novel *The Call of the Toad*: “What was lost in the war is being retaken by economic power. True, it’s being done peacefully. No tanks, no

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<sup>162</sup> Konrád, *Melancholy of Rebirth*, 23.

<sup>163</sup> Kundera, *Ignorance*, 73. French: “Dans ce pays, le gens savaient à peine que les Noirs existaient” (72).

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. French: “Sans aucun doute, la peinture a été exécutée après 1989, quand le pays a adopté les slogans des temps nouveaux: fraternité de toutes les races; mélange de toutes les cultures; unité de tout, unité de tous” (71-2).

dive-bombers. No dictator rules, only the free market.”<sup>165</sup>

Although no-one remains to bind them to their exilic homes in France and Denmark (Irena’s younger daughter is at boarding school in England and Josef’s Danish wife has recently died), neither have any desire to return to their common former homeland. Irena is bound to her life in France by the sense of independence it gives her (including her own apartment), while for Josef “home” is embodied by the recurrent visions he has of a wooden fence and a fir tree, which demarcate the entrance to his Danish brick house and home, the fir tree planted by his wife “like an arm she’d raised from afar to show him the way back home.”<sup>166</sup> Yet conversely, both retain a nostalgic “love” for their former homeland, which somewhat ironically sets them even further apart from their more sober and pragmatic countrymen. Milada reminds Irena that “suffering-contests are over now” and that in the new time “people brag about success.”<sup>167</sup> Josef, on the other hand, is rebuffed by his friend N. when he asks whether anyone still loves or is willing to die for the country, with N. responding that “[d]ying for your country—that’s all finished. Maybe for you time stopped during your emigration. But they—they don’t think like you anymore.”<sup>168</sup> Echoing Potok’s assaults on the changed cultural climate in *City Sister Silver*,

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<sup>165</sup> Grass, *Call of the Toad*, 204. Again from a German perspective, W.G. Sebald makes a similar observation, writing “[p]erhaps we ought to remind ourselves . . . when the project of creating a greater Europe, a project that has already failed twice, is entering a new phase, and the sphere of influence of the Deutschmark—history has a way of repeating itself—seems to extend almost precisely to the confines of the area occupied by the Wehrmacht in the year 1941” (*Natural History of Destruction*, 13).

<sup>166</sup> Kundera, *Ignorance*, 143: French: “un sapin tel un bras qu’elle lève afin de lui montrer de loin leur chez-eux” (134).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. French: “Mais ces compétitions de souffrance sont terminées. Aujourd’hui, on se vante du succès, pas de la souffrance” (43).

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 156. French: “Mourir pour son pays, cela n’existe plus. Peut-être que pour toi, pendant ton émigration, le temps s’est arrêté. Mais eux, ils ne pensent plus comme toi” (145).



Irena asks Milada whether people “still read poetry these days,” to which Milada replies “[h]ardly at all,”<sup>169</sup> a further subtle evocation of the post-1989 ruins of east European literature.

In the *Odyssey* intertext to *Ignorance*, Kundera writes that “Homer glorified nostalgia with a laurel wreath and thereby laid out a moral hierarchy of emotions. Penelope stands at its summit, very high above Calypso.”<sup>170</sup> In Kundera’s first book of return, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for Tomáš and Tereza (to borrow Ugrešić’s interpretation from *The Ministry of Pain*), returning home equals death, remaining in exile defeat, and the ironic split-second of departure the only moment of triumph. In *Ignorance*, Irena and Josef, two returnees on their first visit “home” from the frontlines of the recently-ended Cold War, are—for very different reasons—as alienated from and bewildered by their former homeland and those who remained “at home” as any of the returnee protagonists of post-1945 *Trümmerliteratur*.

For all this, Kundera nevertheless offers Irena and Josef something that Ugrešić never offers Tanja and her students, nor Böll to Hans in *The Silent Angel*, nor Wolfgang Borchert to Beckmann in *The Man Outside*—the relief that the loss of one’s first home does not preclude the eventual establishment of another. Like Böll’s diktat that *Trümmerliteratur* dealt with “what we saw when we came home,” in the post-1989 context *Ignorance* follows the same principle. Irena and Josef confront the same “speechlessness” and are witness to similar forces of

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 160. French: “Est-ce que qu’aujourd’hui on lit encore de la poésie? ‘Plus guère’” (149).

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 9. French: “Homère glorifia la nostalgie par une couronne de laurier et stipula ainsi une hiérarchie morale des sentiments. Pénélope en occupe le sommet, très haut au-dessus de Calypso” (15).

restoration and occupation. The post-1945 and post-1989 contexts may be remarkably different, but the concerns remain remarkably similar. The crucial difference is that for post-1989 returnees such as Irena and Josef, or to make the jump from fiction into life—writers such as Kundera and Ugrešić—new homes are possible; importantly, their *raison d'être* is more existential than political. In this way Kundera removes the laurel wreath Homer placed upon Penelope, and sets it gently down on Calypso, and in doing so, registers a further triumph for the writer in exile.

### **5.6 Dubravka Ugrešić: *Baba Jaga je snijela jaje* (2008)**

The number of reviews and scholarly articles that have framed the exilic diptych of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Ministry of Pain* as “mourning works” or *Trauerarbeit* for the death of Yugoslavia, suggests a post-Yugoslav “Second Life” for Dubravka Ugrešić. In this Second Life, which began with “voluntarily exile,” Ugrešić’s writing has been marked by a tristesse often as difficult to localize as it is for her narrators and characters to anaesthetise. With this in mind, Serbian writer Vladimir Arsenijević’s suggestion in a 2009 interview with Ugrešić that her most recent novel *Baba Jaga Laid an Egg* signals a tiredness with politics and the post-Yugoslav everyday, and a return to both the feminist themes and “playful” spirit of her Yugoslav-era fiction, is fascinatingly representative of the novel’s Croatian and ex-Yugoslav reception.<sup>171</sup> Ugrešić responded to Arsenijević that the novel could indeed be understood as a return to her “youthful” fascination with the art of literature. Insofar as her

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<sup>171</sup> Ugrešić, interview by Arsenijević.

response implies that the highly intertextual *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Ministry of Pain* were not, or were somehow less, bound up with literature itself, one wonders if it was simply an off-hand remark to assist the conversation with Arsenijević. Whatever the case, the premise that *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* is a departure from the tristesse of the former Yugoslavia—and from “the literature of the ‘east European ruins’”—provides an excellent starting point for discussion.

This question of continuity and change is one taken up in one of the only two hitherto published academic studies of the novel, with Anera Ryznar maintaining that in the context of Ugrešić's opus, *Baba Yaga* “is simultaneously both a departure and a continuity.”<sup>172</sup> On this same question, reviewer Šaša Ćirić suggests that in terms of the dialogue *Baba Yaga* establishes with Ugrešić's previous work, the novel is a kind of “creative authorial recycling project.”<sup>173</sup> Ćirić notes the Bulgarian links it shares with *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the social criticism it shares with *The Ministry of Pain*, the critiques of “the simulacrum of wellness, the anorexic terror of the media, and the American cult of youth and the body”<sup>174</sup> it shares with Ugrešić's essayistic work, not to mention the multiple narrative strategies of *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*,

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<sup>172</sup> Anera Ryznar, “Lutanja kroz imaginarno i diskurzivne strategije presvlačenja jednoga žanra,” [http://www.hrvatskiplus.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=788:lutanja-kroz-imaginarno-i-diskurzivne-strategije-presvlačenja-jednoga-anra&catid=36:citanje-proze&Itemid=48](http://www.hrvatskiplus.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=788:lutanja-kroz-imaginarno-i-diskurzivne-strategije-presvlačenja-jednoga-anra&catid=36:citanje-proze&Itemid=48) [accessed August 15, 2011]. Croatian: “istodobno je i odstupanje i kontinuitet.”

<sup>173</sup> Saša Ćirić, “Mitsko jaje snagu daje,” <http://booksa.hr/vijesti/6/1199> [accessed March 2, 2011]. Serbian: “kreativna autorska reciklaža.” A further aspect of the suggested “recycling project” is the novel's title, originally an Aleksei Remizov citation Ugrešić first used to preface the short story “Who Am I?” from her collection *Life Is a Fairytale*. In fact, in the previously cited Arsenijević interview, Ugrešić concedes having been so fond of the line that she used *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* as the title of the 2004 Polish translation of *Life Is a Fairytale*. The Polish edition of *Baba Yaga* is therefore called—*Life Is a Fairytale*.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. Serbian: “wellnes simulakruma, anoreksičnog terora medija, američkog kulta tela i mladosti.”

and the novel's flirtations with the romance genre last seen in *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*. Less exhaustively, Helena Sablić-Tomić suggests the novel's use of parody, quasi-autobiographical elements, citations, multi-referentiality, and narrative deviation into the mythical and ironical are fundamental characteristics of Ugrešić's oeuvre as a whole.<sup>175</sup> Gordan Duhaček notes the novel's humour, suggesting it reveals how with time, Ugrešić has "become less bitter about the state of the nation."<sup>176</sup> And in a review essay in *The London Review of Books*, Marina Warner stressed that while Ugrešić has been "circling th[e] territory" covered in *Baba Yaga* for some time, she is "in much higher spirits"<sup>177</sup> than in her previous post-Yugoslav prose.<sup>178</sup>

The overwhelming warmth of the five Croatian reviews of the novel points to a considerable irony. With three of the five reviewers explicitly praising the novel as a "return" to the light-hearted postmodernism of her Yugoslav-era fiction, *Baba Yaga*—a novel about the most famous Slavic witch figure of all—seems to have signalled a kind of "reintegration" into Croatian literary life for Ugrešić, a flight home to a milieu she once departed on the very same broom. (The novel is part of an international publishing project conceived by the British publisher Canongate, in which selected international authors reinterpret a "myth" of their

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<sup>175</sup> Helena Sablić-Tomić, review of *Baba Jaga je snijela jaje* by Dubravka Ugrešić, *Vjesnik*, September 23, 2008, <http://www.mvinfo.hr/izdvojeno-kritike-opsirnije.php?ppar=2568> [accessed March 2 2011].

<sup>176</sup> Duhaček, review of *Baba Jaga*. Croatian: "Dubravka Ugrešić ipak s vremenom postala manje ogorčena na stanje nacije."

<sup>177</sup> Marina Warner, "Witchiness," *The London Review of Books*, August 27, 2009, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n16/marina-warner/witchiness> [accessed March 2, 2011].

<sup>178</sup> Warner's review drew a scathing response from nationalist writer and politician, Hrvoje Hitrec, who, playing to the choir on a right-wing Internet portal, employed the same bile-filled rhetoric about Ugrešić that I have frequently cited. See Hrvoje Hitrec, "Krivotvorine u engleskom časopisu za književnost" ["Fabrications in English Literary Magazine"], September 3, 2009, <http://www.hkv.hr/izdvojeno/komentari/hhitrec/5020-krivotvorine-u-engleskom-asopisu-za-književnost.html> [accessed September 23, 2011].

choosing.<sup>179</sup>) But this return or reintegration appears to have only been made possible due to the fact that, for the most part, she has abandoned the subject matter of the Yugoslav wars and their aftermath. The only possible conclusion to be drawn—backed by the preferences of everyone from Antun Šoljan, to Viktor Žmegač, to Krešimir Nemeć, Slobodan Prosperov Novak and others—is that in literature, as in life, Croatian critics (who are predominantly male) prefer their women as helpless victims, whether they be called Steffie, Pupa, Kukla, Beba (the latter three being *Baba Yaga's* heroines)—or Dubravka.

With the above in mind, it bears emphasising that the following reading of the novel is a *limited* one. A full literary analysis of the novel's mythic prototext of the figure of Baba Yaga is beyond the scope (or interest) of the present study, as is a more detailed feminist reading, to which the novel certainly lends itself. In keeping with the idea of a post-1989 literature of the east European ruins, I am primarily interested in the aspects of the novel in which Ugrešić thematically deals with questions of postcommunism, “winners” and “losers” in the new time, and the formal and aesthetic means she employs to address them.

The first of *Baba Yaga's* three sections reprises the topos and locus of a mother-daughter relationship in the towerblocks of New Zagreb, first encountered in *Museum* and *Ministry*. While mother and daughter still perform conversations in which they know each other's lines in advance, the internecine and undeclared warfare of the previous two novels is replaced by a bittersweet mutual

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<sup>179</sup> Other noted authors in the series include Margaret Atwood, Victor Pelevin, Alexander McCall Smith, A.S. Byatt, and Philip Pullman. See <http://www.themyths.co.uk/>.

acceptance—the mother having become increasingly ill and the novel's first incarnation of the figure of Baba Yaga. Having agreed to be her mother's *bedel* or surrogate, the daughter—also the first person narrator—travels to her mother's birthplace of Varna in Bulgaria, ostensibly to locate and gather news of her mother's closest teenage friend. The narrator, however, sees her mission as the taking of photographs, hoping that they might arrest her mother's increasing dementia. It bears the briefest of underlining that the relationship between photography and memory and the motif of the surrogate are also crucial to *Museum* and *Ministry*. In echoes of Tanja's return visits to Zagreb, when the narrator returns to Varna, the city she had often visited for summer holidays, she barely recognises it, confessing that she can't remember whether the present “Independence Square” has been renamed or not.

In postsocialist Varna the two most striking images are, on the one hand, a luxury communist-era hotel plastered with billboards and occupied by “people . . . not troubled by the aesthetic of communism: transition thieves, thugs, criminals, smugglers and prostitutes,”<sup>180</sup> and on the other, the ubiquitous advertisements for a real estate agency impressively named “Bulgarian Property Dream.” These images lead to an exchange between the narrator and her rather pesky travelling companion, Aba:

“This is so awful. Is it a lack of cash that has made them plaster the buildings with billboards?” . . .

“Well, New York is one big advertisement!” . . .

“Yes, but everything developed there at a natural pace.” . . .

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<sup>180</sup> Ugrešić, *Baba Yaga*, 53. Croatian: “Hotel su, očito, bili okupirali ti kojima estetika komunizma nije smetala: tranzicijski lopovi, krimosi, mafiozi, šverceri i prostitutke” (57).

“And so it will here as well.” . . .

“This used to be a lovely town. But now it has been turned into a way station for transition gold diggers. Everything is falling apart, abandoned, it all looks so vulgar.” . . .

“It is the transition that is vulgar.”<sup>181</sup>

Importantly, the vulgarity of transition is engendered by both locals and foreigners, the criminal nouveau riche on the one hand, and on the other (at least by implication) the moderately solvent western Europeans buying up Bulgarian property, as described by Ugrešić in the title essay of *Nobody's Home*.<sup>182</sup> This consistent fingering of both local and “imported” forces as equally culpable for the more distressing developments in post-1989 eastern Europe puts Ugrešić’s writing well outside the schemas of the alleged subaltern “writing back.” As one of *Baba Yaga’s* narrators later makes clear in reference to suspicious Russian capital, “money has no nationality, only people do, and generally speaking those are people who have nothing else.”<sup>183</sup>

In a sly nod to Kundera’s *The Farewell Waltz*, Part Two of the novel takes place at what was once a Czech spa resort—in its Second Life it has become a Wellness Centre. The “unlikely troika” of Zagreb pensioners—Pupa, Kukla, and Beba—who spend an even more unlikely holiday at the Wellness Centre, are all avatars

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 53-4. Croatian: “Sve je ovo strašno . . . Valjda nemaju novaca za renovaciju pa pokrivaju kuće reklamama” . . .

“Pa i New York je grad-reklama!” . . .

“Da, ali tamo je sve sraslo na prirodan način.” . . .

“I ovdje će s vremenom srasti.” . . .

“Ovo je nekada bio lijep grad. A sada je pretvoren u settlersko naselje lovaca na tranzicijsko zlato. Sve je u raspadu, sve zapušteno, i sve djeluje prostački.” . . .

“Sama tranzicija je prostačka.” (58)

<sup>182</sup> Ugrešić also describes the new migrations—West to East—in some detail in the previously cited Arsenijević interview.

<sup>183</sup> Ugrešić, *Baba Yaga*, 98. Croatian: “lova nema nacionalnosti, samo je ljudi imaju, i to ljudi koji obično nemaju ništa drugo” (98).

of Baba Yaga and people simply too old for Second Lives. As they enter, the receptionist, expert at judging the depths of guests' pockets, swears to himself that they must be lost. Yet his doubts bring a "witchly" vengeance down upon him—a strange wind drifts through reception and he suffers a paralysing pain in his lower back (lumbago), known in German as a *Hexenschuss* and in Croatian as a *vještičji udarac*—a witch's blow—the receptionist punished (unknown to him) by the "three old witches" for his insolence.

One way or another all three of the women appear to be losers in the new time. Having lost all her savings in the Ljubljanska Banka swindle—"when the country fell apart . . . and everyone had been rushing headlong to steal from everyone else"<sup>184</sup>—Beba's pension is barely enough to cover her basic bills and food. The Gavrilović salami she carries with her on the journey from Zagreb makes her look "like a comic figure from some other age who had accidentally found herself in this one."<sup>185</sup> With Beba luxuriating in the bath in her room, unable to remember the last time she had felt "greater warmth or tenderness," the narrator suggests that "[t]his was the kind of painful realisation that drives the more sensitive to put a bullet in their temple, or at least to look around to see where they might attach an adequately strong noose."<sup>186</sup> When the telephone above the bath rings—Beba had thought it was an additional shower-head—and

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<sup>184</sup> Ugrešić, *Baba Yaga*, 88. Croatian: "kada se država raspala i kad su svi jurnuli da jedni druge što brže pokradu" (90). When Yugoslavia fell apart the Slovenian-based Ljubljanska banka simply refused to honour deposits held by Croatian and Bosnian customers at its Zagreb and Sarajevo branches. The matter is a source of tension in bi-lateral relations with both countries to this day.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 89. Croatian: "S tom kobasicom sličila je na tragikomičnog stvora iz nekog drugog vremena koje se greškom obrelo u ovome" (90).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 90. Croatian: "Bila je to teška spoznaja, nakon koje osjetljiviji ljudi opaljuju sebi metak u sljepoočicu, ili barem gledaju na što će objesiti dovoljno čvrstu omču" (90).



she is told that dinner will be in an hour, the narratorial voice cheerfully comments: “There was plenty of time for suicide. Dinner first.”<sup>187</sup>

Pupa’s story (Pupa being the only of the troika to appear in Part One), which we learn from her grandson David, is more distressing still. Born a Jewess, she is married for the first time, in 1938, to Aaron, a fellow medical student, and in 1939 they have a daughter, Asja. With racial laws being enacted all over Europe, Aaron’s parents head for the relative safety of London, taking Asja with them. In 1941, when the Croatian version of these laws are enacted, Pupa and Aaron head for the hills to join the Partisan struggle, escaping death in the concentration camp of Jasenovac, where Pupa’s parents and brother are killed. Aaron dies in battle in 1944, and finally in 1947 Pupa makes it to London to collect Asja. For whatever reason, the eight-year-old Asja refuses to return to Zagreb, and after her own return, in 1950 Pupa is sent to Goli otok as a political prisoner, never knowing the name of her accuser, or of what she has been accused. On her eventual release she is unable to leave the country. In 1955 she remarries—Kukla’s brother Kosta—and two years later they have a daughter, Zorana.

Pupa’s first daughter, Asja, never forgives her for her abandonment, thinking her a “monster,” and neither is Pupa’s relationship with Zorana a particularly healthy one. Zorana marries a man, who, when Yugoslavia begins to disintegrate, comes running to march to the nationalist drumming, hanging “Catholic crosses round Zorana’s and the children’s necks, and a portrait of one his ancestors, an Ustasha

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 91. Croatian: “Za samoubojstvo uvijek ima vremena. Najprije večera.” (92).

cut-throat, on the wall.”<sup>188</sup> His fervour doesn’t go unnoticed and he is rewarded with a directorship and plentiful opportunities for embezzlement. After he makes abusive remarks about “bloody Yid” conspiracies and calls for the murder of Serbs, Pupa refuses to let him ever cross her threshold. As Pupa sees it, Zorana, who is also a doctor, refuses to help her end her life, “keeping her alive so that she would at last ‘open her eyes’ and realise how much things had changed and that her life and values no longer had anything to do with the new reality.”<sup>189</sup>

Kukla’s life story also has its share of tragedy, although with few of the political under- and overtones. She marries the first man she sleeps with, both united by the shame of her having had a vaginal spasm, but he dies of leukaemia soon after the wedding. Her second husband, a decade and a half her senior, suffers a stroke immediately after their union and turns “into a demanding houseplant. And a very demanding one at that.”<sup>190</sup> For her third husband, Kukla deliberately chooses an invalid, a writer who having fallen down some stairs is permanently confined to a wheelchair. She never has children, and as we are informed “[s]he was a perfect wife, a wife-cover, wife-prosthesis, wife-mask.”<sup>191</sup> The only *bittersweet* upside to Kukla’s life story is when she pulls one over the Croatian literary world by publishing a novel entitled *Desert Rose*, claiming it was written by her late husband, and it is hailed as a masterpiece.

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 116. Croatian: “objesio Zorani i djeci katoličke križeve oko vrata, a na zid portret svoga pretka, ustaškog koljača” (114).

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 117. Croatian: “da je drži na životu kako bi konačno 'progledala' i shvatila koliko su se stvari promijenile i koliko njezin život i njezine vrijednosti nemaju više nikakve veze s novom stvarnošću” (115-16).

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 159. Croatian: “u zahtjevnu kućnu biljku. Pri tom jako zahtjevnu” (153).

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. Croatian: “Bila je savršena žena, žena-pokriće, žena-proteza, žena-masku” (154).

There are several important points to be made here. Kukla claims to have been her late husband's typist—typing having been the profession of Steffie Speck, one of Ugrešić's most inventive literary creations. Steffie's struggle is to find "storylines" for her life, ones not written in advance by others, by romantic prototypes that confine women to marginal roles. That Kukla can only "tell her own story" and have her literary prowess recognised under her husband's name likewise suggests that a woman wanting to tell her story must first consent to becoming a man. Kukla believes that "the Fates meted her out a destiny based on a 'bad joke,'"<sup>192</sup> and Pupa and Beba offer similar refractions of the same sentiment. As we learn in Part Three, the names Kukla, Pupa, and Beba, are all kinds of *lutke*, "puppets" or "dolls." As "puppets" in Ugrešić's authorial hands, they live lives in which somebody else always appears to be pulling the strings, and while they may have been "dolls" when they were younger, now elderly they are *babe*—"grannies."

Yet Ugrešić's narrative far from confines the three women to helplessness. Unaware of her witchly powers, Kukla outlives her three husbands, and there is an implication that a witchly power controlled the golf ball that kills Mr. Shaker. Likewise, Kukla is constantly surrounded by a strange breeze, a symbolic nod to Baba Jaga as a mistress of the wind. Pupa, too, is a survivor, having endured the death of her husband, the Second World War, Goli otok, the hatred of her first daughter, disagreement with her second, and nationalism (a particularly severe blow to a Jewess and former Partisan). Beba has artistic talent (although she has never been able to do anything with it), possesses a strange gift for languages

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 160. Croatian: "suđaje su joj dodijelile sudbinu koja se temeljila na 'lošem vicu'" (154).

(sometimes clumsily utilised) and has luck with numbers, yet thinks herself stupid. In short, all three women have strong personalities, yet inevitably remain unaware of their power and potential. The possibility of female empowerment suggested in the novel's conclusion presents a vision of what might happen were women to finally realise and utilise their “witchly” powers.

In Part Two of the novel we meet two dedicated proponents of the cult of the body—one American and one Czech—both on the make for quick money. The first, the aptly-named Mr. Shaker, is a septuagenarian whose range of body-building supplements were proven to cause impotence stateside, and so he arrives in eastern Europe to

have a good sniff around the post-communist market . . . to drive the ‘easterners,’ stodgy with beer, yellow with smoking and bloated with alcohol, to reshape their bodies from what had been commercially incompatible to what was compatible.<sup>193</sup>

Mr. Shaker’s quest involves recruiting a studly Bosnian refugee for an advertising campaign to relaunch his pills and potions in the US market. The Bosnian, a certain “Mevlo” who works at the Wellness Centre as a masseur, has had a permanent erection since a Serbian shell exploded alongside him.<sup>194</sup> After

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 93. Croatian: “da onjuši postkomunističko tržište . . . da natjera 'istočnjake' zadrigle od piva, požutjele od pušenja i otekle od alkohola da preoblikuju svoja tijela iz inkompatibilnih u tržišno kompatibilna” (94).

<sup>194</sup> Responding to Beba’s assumption that he is a Bosnian Muslim, Mevlo replies: “Hardly love! I’m like the former Yugoslavia, like a Bosnian stew, I’m a bit of everything. My dad was Bosnian and my mother half-Croatian, half-Slovene. And there were all sorts in the family: Montenegrins, Serbs, Macedonians, Czechs” (107). Croatian: “Ma koji, bona, Musliman! Ja sam ti ko bivša Juga, ko bosanski lonac, imam svega pomalo. Babo mi je Bosanac, a mati pola Hrvatica, pola Slovenka. A u rodu je bilo svega, Crnogoraca, Srba, Makedonaca, Čeha” (106). In terms of his identity, Mevlo is far from unique in post-Yugoslav fiction. The anti-hero of Aleksandar Hemon’s *Nowhere Man* (London: Picador, 2004), Jozef Pronek, famously replies to the question of whether he is Serb or

negotiating a deal to receive Naomi Campbell modelling rates, Melvo never actually makes it to America, as Mr. Shaker suffers a fatal heart attack on the resort golf course after hitting a ball into the sky, which as gravity does its work lands in his mouth. At this point it is again worth remembering that the book is intended—at least in part—to be a reworking of a fairy tale. Furthermore, as Part Two progresses, more and more fantastical elements creep in: Beba inadvertently wins big at the casino, Pupa passes away drinking champagne in a floating chair in the hotel swimming pool,<sup>195</sup> and the only “coffin” Beba and Kukla can locate for her in the small spa town is an artistic egg sculpture they buy from a boutique catering to Russian tourists with more money than taste.

Mr. Shaker’s Czech counterpart is Dr. Topolanek, a “longevity” expert and director of the Wellness Centre, someone unequivocally looking to work the “new situation” in eastern Europe to his advantage. He quickly realises that there is easy money to be made preying on human vanity and that, in the new time, categories of winners and losers are going to be assessed under criteria very different from those many had imagined. Unlike his dissident parents, towards whom “freedom [has] behaved like a capricious Santa Claus,” Dr. Topolanek’s own “revolutionary dream” is to be “played out in a more profitable, more beautiful and softer place—in the human body.”<sup>196</sup> For not only have the new

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Muslim with the very understated “I am complicated” (46). And the young narrator of Saša Stanišić’s *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2006); translated by Anthea Bell as *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* (London: Phoenix, 2008)), replies to a similar question with: “Ich bin ein Gemisch. Ich bin ein Halbhalb. Ich bin Jugoslawe—ich zerfalle also” (41). (“I am a mixture. I am a half-half. I am a Yugoslav—and that means I’m falling apart” 53.)

<sup>195</sup> The topos recalls the death of the Spanish writer Jose Ramon Espeso in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, who mysteriously drowns in a hotel swimming pool in Zagreb.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 99. Croatian: “odigravala na isplativijem, ljepšem i mekšem mjestu—na ljudskome tijelu” (99).

tranches of money sloshing around bypassed Topolanek's intellectual parents, moral acknowledgement has also given them a wide berth.

Offering a variant of Günter Grass's previously-cited assertion that "[w]hat was lost in the war is being retaken by economic power. True, it's being done peacefully. No tanks, no dive-bombers. No dictator rules, only the free market,"<sup>197</sup> Topolanek's parents notice how "[t]he Russians embarked softly on a new kind of occupation, not with tanks as before, but with crinkly banknotes."<sup>198</sup> In *The Ministry of Pain* his parents would have formed part of the "nameless mass" drowning at water's bottom, two of the millions whose transmission into the "new time" has failed. But in *Baba Yaga* the narrative bitterness of the former novel has given way to whimsy: "They had struggled and beaten Big Brother, and now they watched it on television every day."<sup>199</sup>

With us readers snugly wrapped in this whimsical swaddling, Part Two thus offers farcical reimaginings of concerns Ugrešić has expressed far more seriously elsewhere: the cult of the body in the essay simply entitled "Body" from *Have a Nice Day*, and the production of "compatible players"—east Europeans wired for the new time—so critically deconstructed in *The Ministry of Pain*. We might also recall that the emblematic Bosnian from *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* was a young amputee begging in front of Berlin's Zoo Station with a cardboard sign that read *Ich bin aus Bosnien*: in *Baba Yaga* his surrogate, Mevlo, is a

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<sup>197</sup> Grass, *Call of the Toad*, 204.

<sup>198</sup> Ugrešić, *Baba Yaga*, 98. Croatian: "Rusi su u drugu okupaciju krenuli meko, ne sa tenkovima kao nekada, već sa šuštavim novčanicama" (98).

<sup>199</sup>Ibid., 98. Croatian: "Borili su se i uspješno izborili protiv Velikog Brata, a sada su ga, 'Big Brother Show,' gledali na televiziji svaki dan" (98).

countryman with a very different kind of wooden leg. Part Two is also peppered with a dozen or so extra-diegetic rhymes on the art of storytelling, such as “[t]hat’s what Beba was thinking. What about us? We carry on. While life like a seal wallows in glee, the tale sails off to the open sea,”<sup>200</sup> these rhymes playing an integral part in creating the novel’s fantastic “fairy tale” aesthetic.

Metacommentary as a levity-producing device is of course well employed by Ugrešić in *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*, and in an extended variant, in the different kinds of “Author’s Notes” that bookend both that novella and its follow-up short story collection *Život je bajka* (Life is a fairytale). Part Three of *Baba Yaga* is in fact a metafictional *explication de texte* of Parts One and Two. Authored by a certain Dr. Aba Bagay (note the anagram), a fledgling Slavic folklorist of Bulgarian origin (the narrator’s pesky traveling companion from Part One), Part Three is, as Dr. Bagay suggests, “Baba Yaga for Beginners”—an introduction to “Babayagiology.” In Dr. Bagay’s notes, we learn—among many, many other things—the etymology of the word *baba*; the origins and variants of Baba Yaga across cultures, continents, and historical epochs; about her appearance (her claws, beak, toothlessness, and hirsutism), her home or hut, her accessories—the comb, towel, and the mortar in which she travels as if in an egg or womb—and about her habits, including the allegations of cannibalism. All of this “scholarship” is then applied by Dr. Bagay to produce readings of aspects of Parts One and Two.

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 91. Croatian: “Tako je razmišljala Beba. A mi? Mi idemo dalje. Dok se život zapliće ko pile u kućini, priča plovi ka plavoj pućini” (92).

With the novel flying towards its end, the reader pacified by the dummy of Ugrešić's little game, Dr. Bagay suddenly becomes a very unreliable narrator and hits us with a sucker punch, having first buried a horseshoe in her glove. In a tone somewhere between real rage and gallows humour Dr. Bagay warns us of Baba Yaga's impending revenge:

So let us imagine women (that hardly negligible half of humankind, after all), those Baba Yagas, plucking the swords from beneath their heads and sallying forth to settle the accounts?! For every smack in the face, every rape, every affront, every drop of spittle on their faces. Can we imagine all those Indian brides and widows rising from the ashes where they were buried alive and going forth into the world with drawn swords in their hands?! Let's try to imagine all those invisible women peering out between their woven bars, from their dark bunker-burkas . . . Let's imagine a million-strong army of 'madwomen,' homeless women, beggar women; women with faces scorched by acid, because self-styled righteous men took offence at the expression on a bare female face . . . Let's imagine millions of prostitutes around the world reaching for their swords: white, black and yellow slaves who were raped, beaten, stripped of their rights, and whose masters cannot be stopped by anybody. The hundreds of thousands of girls destroyed by Aids, victims of insane men, paedophiles, but also of their lawful husbands and fathers. The African women who are shackled with metal rings; the circumcised women with their vaginas sewn up; the women with silicone breasts and lips, botoxed faces and cloned smiles.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 325-6. Croatian: "Jer zamislimo da žene (Što je tek zanemariva polovica čovječanstva, zar ne?), Baba Jage, izvade mačeve ispod svojih glava i krenu u naplatu računa?! Za svaku pljusku, za svako silovanje, za svaku uvredu, za svaku povredu, za svaku pljuvačku koja je pala na njihova lica. Zamislimo samo da se iz pepela dignu sve one spaljene indijske nevjeste i udovice i krenu svijetom s isukanim mačevima u ruci?! Zamislimo sve one nevidljive žene, koje kroz končane rešetke vire iz svojih platnenih bunkera-burki . . . Zamislimo milijunsku vojsku 'luđakinja,' beskućnica, prosjakinja; žena s licima spaljenim od kiseline, jer je samozvane muške pravednike uvrijedio pogled na otkriveno žensko lice . . . Da svoje mačeve dohvate milijuni prostitutki diljem svijeta, bijelo, crno i žuto roblje koje se preprodaje po tržnicama mesa, roblje koje je silovano, pretučeno, obespravljeno, i čijim gospodarima, gle, nitko ne može stati za vrat . . . Da krenu one stotine tisuća djevojčica zaraženih aidsom, žrtve umobolnika, pedofila, ali i svojih zakonskih muževa i očeva, da i one krenu . . . Da krenu afričke žene vratova okovanih metalnim ringovima; da krenu žene odrezanih klitorisa i zašivenih vagina; da krenu i žene sa silikonskim grudima i silikonskim usnicama, s botox-licima i kloniranim osmijesima" (311-12).



*Baba Yaga* is clearly a departure from the tristesse of Yugoslavia—and “the literature of the ‘east European ruins’”—but stripping back the narrative invention, it is a departure *towards* a still more insoluble sadness. As to whether *Baba Yaga* is a return to the playful spirit of Ugrešić’s Yugoslav fiction, it is crucial to bear in mind an observation Andrea Zlatar makes with regard to Steffie Speck. Zlatar suggests that the wittiness of the novella allowed readers and critics to not think of Steffie as an oppressed and marginalized female subject, although she met all the requisite criteria.<sup>202</sup> Likewise, Zlatar suggests, peeling back the layers of parody and irony in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, left a novel that actually had many serious things to say—particularly about mutual East-West stereotyping, and about the soon-to-be-deadly business of writers acting as national representatives. In these respects, we might well agree that with *Baba Yaga*, Ugrešić is up to her old tricks.

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<sup>202</sup> Zlatar, *Tekst, tijelo, trauma*, 120.

## **6. “THE FUTURE HAS NO FUTURE”**

### **6.1 Endings (1)**

I met Gabi on a train back from Prague sometime in early 2000. She was returning to her job as an au pair for a German family in Regensburg, I to mine teaching English in Munich. In May 2011, over eleven years later, we met again, in Brno, where she now lives with her husband and their young son. Gabi spent several of the intervening years au pairing in London, where she met František, a Slovak, who strangely enough was doing the same. At some point they returned to the Czech Republic, she first, he following, Gabi finding a job as a translator, and František as a computer programmer for a new Microsoft outpost, brought to Brno with the support of European Union enlargement subsidies.

Gabi picks me up from the train station in a new Toyota station wagon, and we drive back to the pleasant two-bedroom apartment she and František recently bought (with the help of a mortgage) in a new development on the edge of Brno. Down the road is a children’s playground bordering a large pond, and a group of neighbourhood shops, including a health food store and a yoga studio. It occurs to me that this is the Czech version of suburban prosperity. Gabi and František physically live in Brno, but in many ways their lives are somewhere else—or nowhere. Gabi freelances from home, mostly for German companies; translating operating manuals for combine harvesters pays well. František's thousand or so co-workers at Microsoft come from many parts of the world and the office language is English. Gabi and František don't take public transport and only go

into town when they really need to, preferring walks in the rolling fields behind their neighbourhood, where rape flower fields colour the horizon yellow in spring. They travel abroad often, the warmer climes of Italy and Spain attractive.

Whatever problems Gabi and František have in life have little to do with the east European ruins. Although clearly “winners” in the new time, they are no part of any crass or semi-criminal entrepreneurial elite; nor are they the transition “mutants” described in essayistic passages of *The Ministry of Pain*. The lives they have built for themselves are not built on the misfortunes or ruins of others, and neither does the normality of their lives deserve subjection to condescending academic posturing about self-colonisation and mimicry.

## **6.2 Endings (2)**

Shortly after the visit to Brno, I took a regional train from Berlin out to Eisenhüttenstadt (literally “city of iron works”) in eastern Brandenburg, the city lying between the Spree-Oder canal and the Oder River which separates Germany from Poland. The retreating Wehrmacht blew up the bridge to neighbouring Kłopot in 1945, and its ruins lie hulking and rusting at either edge of the river. Eisenhüttenstadt was planned and built as a “socialist model city” after the Second World War, and a steel mill created for employment. The oldest part of the city dates from the early 1950s and consists of three-storey apartment blocks built in the Stalinist “wedding-cake style”—the city was called Stalinstadt until de-Stalinization in 1961. A bilingual cenotaph dominates the deserted main square, the inscription in Russian and German reading: *Schlaft*

*ruhig treue Kampfgenossen. Euer Andenken wird in Jahrhunderten nicht verblassen.* (“Rest in peace loyal comrades-in-arms. In centuries your memory will not fade.”)

But today Eisenhüttenstadt is a forgotten city. In the two decades since the fall of the Wall its population has shrunk by almost half, from a peak of 53,000 in 1988 to around 30,000 in 2011. The median age is over fifty, and there is no end in sight to the spiralling depopulation. Eisenhüttenstadt is locked in a death roll with its own ruins. Entire sections of the city have been torn down, the rubble cleared, and what was once living space returned to grassed fields. No one can say when the wrecking ball will stop its work. Like the grass slowly covering the Balkan minefields and those who remember them, the same is happening in Eisenhüttenstadt. Even the 3,000 or so employees who remain at the now Belgian-owned steelworks are leaving or have left the city itself, preferring life in the surrounding villages.

I was there to visit the well-regarded *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* (Documentation Centre of Everyday Life in the GDR). The Centre was a few kilometres walk into town from the train station, and I stopped at the first petrol station to ask for directions. Shortly before eleven a group of men sat outside on plastic chairs drinking bottled beer. They had all heard of the museum, but no one knew exactly where it was. I continued to another petrol station, and this time a couple of drinkers knew what I was looking for, one dryly suggesting that “the whole city is a museum.” I felt like a current affairs reporter who had just found his headline. Seeing these men—*die Überflüssigen* (surplus people)—

drinking beer at petrol stations on a sunny Sunday spring morning, I thought of what Sebald called the “profound lethargy” of Böll’s *Trümmerleute*, and of his suggestion that

[d]ecades later, it is still characteristic of many of Böll’s central characters that they lack any real will to live. This deficiency, clinging to them like a stigma in the new world of success, is the legacy of an existence among the ruins that was felt to be shameful.<sup>1</sup>

In stark contrast, the Documentation Centre’s curator was a buoyant optimistic woman, who managed to extract a number of euros from me for brochures, maps, and a personal tour of an apartment around the corner recreated with GDR furniture circa-1960. She implored me to come back next month for the opening of a new exhibition. I said I would and knew I wouldn’t, and I’m guessing she knew I wouldn’t too.

### **6.3 Endings (3)**

In early-September 2011, I took the train from Berlin to Wrocław. An hour or so into the journey I thought I had missed the border and that we were already in Poland. The villages looked so forlorn: clusters of low-slung clinker brick houses, cowering and seemingly embarrassed at their own existence. From the train window one couldn’t tell a house from a sty or stable. But we were in Lausitz, on the German side, the region so emptied that over the past few years wolves have been returning to the area for the first time in decades. I thought of the word *vukojebina*—in Serbian and Croatian meaning “where the wolves fuck,” an

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<sup>1</sup> Sebald, *Natural History of Destruction*, 36.

appellation for a village or place forgotten even by God. And because I had been reading something Polish in preparation for my trip, I thought of a passage I had recently underlined in Andrzej Stasiuk's mythopoetic east European travelogue,

*On the Road to Babadag:*

It's a characteristic of my part of the world, this continual disappearance mixed half-and-half with progress, this crafty underdevelopment that makes people wait for everything, this unwillingness to be the subject of an experiment, this perpetual half-heartedness that lets you hop out of the flow of time and substitute contemplation for action. Whatever is new here is bogus; only when it ages and becomes a ruin does it take on meaning.<sup>2</sup>

About an hour or so into Poland (the train was travelling at such an irregular tempo it was impossible to guess the distance we might have travelled) we stopped at the station of Węglińiec for about half an hour, where the locomotive carriage was swapped and a dining car added. Węglińiec is the heart of Silesia, the grandeur of the station suggesting it had once been a bustling service centre. Today it is a picture book example of the aesthetics of ruins; terrifyingly desolate, yet strangely beautiful. I couldn't work out whether it hadn't been painted since the expulsion of the local German population in 1945, or the fall of the Wall. Even Coca-Cola hadn't bothered showing up, and nobody got on or off. Apart from the odd railway worker, the only people to be seen were two elderly security guards in fluorescent yellow vests, who managed to extract a 12-euro fine from a young Swedish tourist ignoring the No Smoking signs on the deserted platform. Seeing them, one tall, the other short, their body movements lumbering and somehow awkward, I thought of Volker Koepp's elegiac documentary

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<sup>2</sup> Stasiuk, *Babadag*, 179.

*Schattenland* (2005, Shadowland), filmed in Masuria in eastern Poland. A group of men stand silently in a circle ice-fishing, before one quietly states that the 125 euro a month they earn is “just enough to stop us dying like dogs.” Asked whether things will get better with Polish EU accession, he replies “[h]opefully. But it’s too late for us. I’ve worked in this trade for 31 years now. Where else should I go? And anyway, who would take me on? I’m just holding out for my pension.” And then I again thought of Stasiuk, and his reflections on an encounter with a Romanian peasant:

I had come and would depart whenever I liked, leaving the old man in the wrecked suit holding a cheap cigarette on a rough road between two ancient houses made of wood, which had survived by some whim of history, though their inhabitants hadn’t particularly wanted them to survive.<sup>3</sup>

Wrocław itself appeared to be booming. The week I visited, the city was hosting a European cultural congress marking the Polish presidency of the EU, thousands were running the annual city marathon, and a Polish challenger was fighting the elder of the Ukrainian-German Klitschko brothers for a world heavyweight belt at a new stadium built for the 2012 European soccer championships. Seventy percent of Wrocław (then Breslau) was destroyed in the Second World War. Neglected under communism, today the city is a phoenix risen from the ruins. Eating pierogi and drinking vodka and unpasteurized beer, tourists mix unobtrusively with the city’s burghers, both enjoying the bustling town square, the riverbank, and the city’s imperial parks.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 14-15.

In Wrocław I watched Austrian director Ulrich Seidl's feature *Import/Export*. The cultural congress's film programme was slyly called "Funny Games EU" (a reference to the brutal Michael Haneke film) and opened with Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya-4-eva*, and also featured Haneke's *Code Unknown* and a host of other films cutting open Europe's underbelly. *Import/Export* tells two parallel stories. The first is that of Olga, a young Ukrainian nurse and solo mother, who, unable to make ends meet in her profession, and unwilling to work in the webcam porn business, leaves for Vienna where she works first as an au pair and then as a cleaner in a Viennese old folk's home and hospice. The second is that of Pauli, a young Austrian, who, down on his luck and in debt, accompanies his stepfather to Slovakia and the Ukraine where they install old slot machines in bars. After a disagreement with his stepfather over the (distressing) humiliation of a Ukrainian prostitute, the film ends with him begging for work unloading crates at a market somewhere in the Ukraine. Beyond a pedagogical lesson in power relationships, the exact message of the film is ambiguous,<sup>4</sup> yet it employs several well-used tropes of the genre. The West is infirm, aging, and impotent, in physical and moral decline; the East tortured, young, and visceral, its survival instincts finely-honed. The crumbling tower blocks of the Ukraine, the harsh anonymised sterility of the "death factory" where Olga works, and the bleakness of Viennese suburbia are all aesthetically equal in their freezing tristesse. Seidl's apocalyptic vision is one of an entire continent in ruins. Having slipped its eastern coordinates, the ruin virus has spread everywhere.

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<sup>4</sup> For a more complete analysis of the film see the short review essay in William Brown, Dina Iordanova, and Leshu Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images: Cinema and Trafficking in the New Europe* (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2010), 191-96.



## 6.4 The Ruin Virus

“No one can honestly deny the obvious: this was an assault that made no demands, a threat without a message, and it had nothing to do with ‘politics.’”<sup>5</sup> “Like lost children we trashed the prized trinkets of a society that deserves no more respect than the monuments of Paris at the end of the Bloody Week—and knows it.”<sup>6</sup> Reading these lines on the train to Wrocław my immediate association was with the recent riots in the impoverished boroughs of London. Then the 550 cars anonymously torched in Berlin up to that point in 2011 (barely an arrest, not a single conviction) crossed my mind. And finally I thought of Athens burning and the *Indignados* of the Spanish cities, and the very real politics of those events.

The cited lines, however, describe the immigrant riots in the Parisian *banlieues* six years previously. In the pamphlet *The Coming Insurrection* from which they are taken, the anonymous authorial collective “The Invisible Committee” writes of a day “when this capital [Paris] and its horrible concretion of power will lie in majestic ruins”<sup>7</sup>—and of “the future has no future”<sup>8</sup> as the wisdom of our age.

An anarchist-communist pamphlet is perhaps not the firmest ground on which to

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<sup>5</sup> Comité invisible, *L'Insurrection qui vient* (La Fabrique, 2007); translated as *The Coming Insurrection* (Semiotext(e), 2009), 14. The pamphlet received widespread attention in France and elsewhere, but events took a drastic turn in November 2008, when nine people were arrested in helicopter raids by the French gendarmerie in the village of Tarnac, France, and subsequently charged with “criminal association for the purposes of terrorist activity,” the group becoming known as “the Tarnac Nine.” One of the nine, a former doctoral student in political sociology, Julien Coupat, was charged with writing *The Coming Insurrection*. The French Interior Minister labelled the group, five of whom had been living at a Tarnac farmhouse, as “an anarcho-autonomist cell,” which had engaged in acts of sabotage against the French highspeed TGV rail network. Although most were released on strict bail conditions relatively quickly, Coupat was controversially detained until late-May, 2009. The case continues to ricochet around the French justice system.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 13.

receive or make predictions, but “the future having no future” is an idea that has haunted serious scholarship—from that of Andreas Huyssen and Svetlana Boym to Boris Buden’s more recent treatise *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (2009, Transition zone: from the end of postcommunism)—for some time now. If we recall one of the points from where we started in the Introduction, it was also an idea articulated by Ugrešić herself, who in 2000 wrote that “[t]oday, among the ruins of utopian systems (above all communism) . . . the future seems to have disappeared somewhere. Especially the ‘bright future,’ the one that is now resting peacefully in the lexicon of communist ideas.”<sup>9</sup>

The Levi’s Jeans 2011 “Go Forth” advertising campaign naturally doesn’t suggest that “the future has no future,” the fashion industry, after all, relies on the eternal optimism of people buying stuff. But in terms of where we are in the present, the campaign is in complete accord with the writings of both French anarchists and melancholic transatlantic intellectuals. Two of the advertisements thief the symbolic capital of Walt Whitman poems: the first,<sup>10</sup> largely filmed in post-Katrina New Orleans, features a grainy wax-cylinder recording of Whitman reciting the first four lines of his short poem “America”:

[America]  
Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,  
All, all alike endear’d, grown, ungrown, young or old,  
Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,  
Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ugrešić, *Thank You For Not Reading*, 199. Croatian: “Danas, kada bauljamo među ruševinama utopijskih sistema (komunističkog, prije svega) . . . budućnost kao da je nekamo iščezla. Osobito ‘svijetla budućnost,’ ta koja danas miruje u leksikonu ideja komunizma” (232).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdW1CjbCNxw&feature=related>

<sup>11</sup> The remaining two lines are: “A grand, sane, towering, seated Mother/ Chair’d in the adamant of Time.”

It opens with a neon sign of the word “America” half-submerged in water, and among images of iconic Americana mixed with what we might call “post-industrial wasteland chic,” also features fearful-looking suited financiers, African-American children playing, and the obligatory images of attractive young people variously undressed. It ends with these strong freedom-loving young people running into the firework-lit night holding a banner that reads “Go Forth.” The next clip<sup>12</sup> is set to several similarly-recorded stanzas of Whitman’s longer “O Pioneers”:

[Pioneers! O pioneers!]  
Come my tan-faced children,  
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,  
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

For we cannot tarry here,  
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,  
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

O you youths, Western youths,  
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,  
Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

...

We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,  
Fresh and strong the world we seize . . .  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Young Americans, wearing or wriggling into their Levi’s, are captured by the camera in states ranging from fear to rapture, and as the momentum builds, a growing horde stampedes across the wilds and the prairie into the unknown

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG8tqEUTlvs&feature=related>

future, flaming torches and the Levi's "Go Forth" banner in hand. A third advertisement<sup>13</sup> steals not from Whitman, but from the visual post-apocalyptic aesthetics of the 2009 cinematic adaption of Cormac McCarthy's dystopian novel *The Road*. Filmed in Braddock, Pennsylvania, a former steel town (like Eisenhüttenstadt) that since its heyday in the 1950s has seen its population shrink from 20,000 to 2500 residents, the clip has the zombie-like voice of a young girl monotoning:

We were taught how the pioneers went into the West  
They opened their eyes and made up what things could be  
A long time ago things got broken here  
People got sad and left  
Maybe the world breaks on purpose  
So we can have work to do  
People think there aren't frontiers any more  
They can't see how frontiers are all around us

A young man in his Levi's stands at dawn with his dog, warming himself by a fire, anxiously watching a freight train roll by (into the West!), a modern-day Tom Joad. The hypertrophy of boarded-up houses, gothic-looking cottages, and abandoned theatres is interspersed with optimistic images of those who, resilient and strong, are still making their lives among the ruins, playing, shadow boxing, and planting vegetables. Others are rolling up their sleeves and setting to work rebuilding. Yet the Levi's campaign is not the only recent one to prominently employ ruin aesthetics to sell products. Having taken hundreds of millions in taxpayer bailouts, Chrysler allegedly spent eleven million dollars on a

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YyvOGKu6ds>

Super Bowl advertisement entitled “Imported from Detroit”<sup>14</sup> set to Eminem’s *Lose Yourself* (almost 13 million YouTube hits and counting). With a stern voice that sounds like all-American hard man Harvey Keitel, the clip features statues and murals of (Soviet-style) muscular auto factory workers interspersed with images of the city that “has been to hell and back.” In closing, Eminem stands in front of a black choir and an empty theatre and announces, “This is the Motor City and this is what we do.”

What (pedagogical) messages are these commercials sending out? The first is one of worlds in ruins, but that these ruins are sexy and present a moment of (often erotic) opportunity. The second is that “things got broken here,” yet (fleeting images of a couple of evil money men in the Levi’s “America” advertisement aside) the how, why, and by whom is your guess as good as mine. The third is that if “the future is to have a future,” we need to pick up our shovels, circle our crowbars, and get to work on rebuilding the ruins. The fourth, subtler, message is that even when capitalism acknowledges its own ruins, it nevertheless has the ability to “rebrand” its own crisis as something desirable, thus strengthening and reaffirming its dominance. What is the answer to capitalism in ruins? More capitalism!<sup>15</sup> It’s like someone shouting “More communism!” atop the ruins of the Berlin Wall.

The figure of the ruin as “dialectic at a standstill” links all the fragments above: the story of Gabi and František; shrinking Eisenhüttenstadt; the wolf-haunted

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKL254Y\\_jtc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKL254Y_jtc)

<sup>15</sup> On this score, the writer or writers of *The Coming Insurrection* pointedly suggest that “[a]n entity in its death throes sacrifices itself as a content in order to survive as a form” (60).

villages of the Lausitz; the desolation of Węgliniec station; the prosperity of Wrocław; Ulrich Seidl's freezing tristesse; the writings of Stasiuk and *The Invisible Committee*; the commercials of Levi's and Chrysler. The figure of the ruin presents the "once was" alongside the "what is now," even when the "once was" has been gently rendered, grassed over, or erased, offering up the lesson taught to us by Herodotus: "*For those cities that were great in earlier times must have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before . . . Man's good fortune never abides in the same place.*"<sup>16</sup> In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* Ugrešić wrote that "Berlin is a mutant-city, sometimes the East appears in the West and West appears in the East." Today, whether viewed from prefabricated housing blocks on the peripheries of Amsterdam or Stockholm, the boroughs of South London, the blockades of Athens, the boomtown of Wrocław, or the pleasant suburbs of Brno, Europe seems to have taken on something of this mutant quality. Perhaps there is also something in what Ugrešić writes in a recent essay: "East and West definitely no longer exist. In the meantime, the world has split into the rich, who enrich themselves globally, and the poor, who are impoverished locally."<sup>17</sup>

More than twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of both the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union (a break-up more bloody and ruinous than popularly remembered), what does this mutant quality mean for the literature of the east European ruins? Although the initial surge is perhaps over, I have little doubt that for some time to come east European writers will

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<sup>16</sup> Cited in Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 151.

<sup>17</sup> Ugrešić, *Karaoke Culture*, 255. The essay ("The Fly") from which this citation is taken was written subsequent to the publication of *Napad na minibar* and has not yet appeared in Croatian.

continue to find fertile ground for literature among the ruins of the end of communism and the aftermath named transition. What interests me more at this stage is whether we will soon see a new literature of the European/capitalist ruins, an idea not as far-fetched as it might initially sound. Let us again remember the title of Alexei Yurchak's book and its reference to the end of communism: "Everything was forever until it was no more."

### **6.5 The Once Was and the What Is**

And what of Drago Jančar's suggestion that "the literature of 'east European ruins' has not stood a chance, at home or abroad"? It is almost incontestable that—for different reasons—east European literature suffered a dramatic fall from grace at home and abroad following the events of 1989, the whole ecosystem of the state-sponsored, dissident, and exilic modes of publishing reduced to ruins. Yet the success abroad of a former Yugoslav writer such as Dubravka Ugrešić complicates this picture somewhat. Ugrešić unwittingly revived both the dissident and exilic modes of writing that were buried shortly beforehand in an obviously shallow grave alongside the ruins of the Wall. For a writer acknowledged as a mistress of (intentional) irony, the unintentional irony was that her case significantly underlined the ongoing importance of literature for audiences—reading and non-reading—at home and abroad.

As for writers such as Schulze, Meyer, and Topol (and one could here add a much longer list), while gaining critical acclaim in their homelands, and in very limited literary and academic circles abroad, there isn't a single east European writer in

the international literary marketplace today with a reputation to match that of a Kundera, Brodsky, Solzhenitsyn, or Havel. The question of why no new Milan Kundera has emerged since the fall of the Berlin Wall—as Andrew Wachtel maintains he is constantly asked—is probably best answered by “actually there has: his name is Orhan Pamuk.” After all, Pamuk is, like Kundera, a “phenomenon . . . as much sociocultural as literary,”<sup>18</sup> the Islamic world having replaced eastern Europe as the West’s enemy of choice. If and when “the war on terror” ever ends, the new Orhan Pamuk will in all likelihood be Chinese, or perhaps in the form of artist Ai Weiwei, that replacement is already upon us.

While the nineties may have been marked by east European writers rueing the ruins of their literary habitus, the noughties were marked by a different kind of revolution—the Digital Revolution—that for vastly different reasons has seen these ruins spread to the global publishing industry.<sup>19</sup> The dominance of *Amazon.com* and its “long tail” principle, the ongoing explosion in the number of (self-)published books, and the viral spread of illegal downloading all, *inter alia*, suggest that the global publishing industry is itself in ruins. In *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* Ugrešić appeared to predict literature’s coming malaise, a time when “the totalitarian control of literature” would see the same ten books by the same ten authors simultaneously appear in Amsterdam, Berlin, New York, and London bookstore windows. Indeed, “the death of the book” and the ruins of the literary system are themes Ugrešić has explored in considerable depth since her 2002 collection *Thank You for Not Reading* through to *Karaoke Culture* in 2011.

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<sup>18</sup> Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Ewan Morrison, “Are Books Dead, and Can Authors Survive?” *Guardian.co.uk*, August 22, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/aug/22/are-books-dead-ewan-morrison> [accessed October 3, 2011].



In moving to a close, let us take one last poke around the ruins of east European literature and validate the importance of a post-1989 “literature of the ‘east European ruins.’” Wachtel’s thesis was that in the post-Wall period writers and literature in eastern Europe are now no longer as relevant as they once were. He nevertheless acknowledges that an activity that accrued so much symbolic capital over so many years cannot possibly lose it all overnight. Plenty of somewhat unfortunate evidence supports the latter contention.

Reflecting on the post-*Wende* replacement of Berlin street signs bearing the names of communists murdered by the Nazis (and the retention of streets bearing the names of German fighter pilots), Christa Wolf wrote, “[a]ll coincidences, no doubt. Yet the coincidences are beginning to mount up, and coincidentally they all are heading in the same direction: to the right.”<sup>20</sup> In this context it helps for us to recall and add up some of the “coincidental” attacks on (east) European writers critical of Europe’s “new happiness,” from those against Wolf herself, to those on Günter Grass in the wake of *Ein Weites Feld* (Too Far Afield),<sup>21</sup> to those on Jana Hensel and her previously cited memoir, *Zonenkinder*. While arguably no writer in post-1989 Europe has been attacked with the venom Dubravka Ugrešić has been forced to absorb, we should nevertheless also spare a thought for Milan Kundera, who in 2008 was accused of having (in 1950) denounced a man he had never met as a Western spy, leading to the man’s incarceration for 14 years. We should likewise spare a thought for the late

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<sup>20</sup> Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms*, 286.

<sup>21</sup> The cover of the magazine *Der Spiegel* of August 21, 1995, featured critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki ripping up a copy of the novel, which was itself a weightier companion piece to *Unkenrufe* (1992, *The Call of the Toad*) which dealt with German-Polish relations in the immediate post-1989 period. Here we should also recall that in 1990 Grass published a collection of essays arguing against reunification, see *Deutscher Lastenausgleich* (translated as *Two-States – One Nation?*).

Witold Gombrowicz, whose works the Polish Minister of Education in 2007 tried to banish from the school curriculum as “morally damaging.”

With the exception of the Polish exile Gombrowicz, who died in 1969, all of the writers named above have articulated positions that challenge the euphoria of “the reunification of Europe,” and on an East-West axis, offered somber assessments of relations within “the family of European nations.” In and of itself this is hardly surprising: good literature, like all good art, is rarely euphoric. Whether we take Danilo Kiš’s edict that a writer’s power is doubt, or the bleakness of the *Trümmerliteratur* of Heinrich Böll, East and West, “pessimism, melancholia, and disappointment in life” (Zhdanov’s condemnation of Akhmatova) are more often than not the business of literature. That writers are repeatedly attacked for their doubts—particularly in their homelands—is less surprising still. Yet in the postcommunist period it is the very persistence of these “coincidental” attacks that paradoxically confirm literature as far from a spent or irrelevant social force. Many east European writers certainly hoped that the advent of postcommunism would finally allow their literature the freedom to “say” nothing, to become a private metaphysical matter and to be read as such. Yet whether desired or not by Ugrešić and her fellow writers “of the east European ruins,” their work illustrates that in a reunified (?) Europe it is as necessary as ever for literature to provide alternative narratives of a given epoch, and for our purposes, to act as different kinds of barometers of happiness with, and within, Europe.

As exemplary dialectical and polysemic figures, postcommunist ruins embody a critique of—or at minimum, a bearing witness to—the past, the present, and the time inbetween. Given the upheavals of postcommunism, the semantic field of ruins—marked by deliberate or inadvertent neglect, by melancholy, nostalgia, and euphoria, by destruction and reconstruction, burial and resurrection, loss and restoration, presence and absence, pride and shame, remembering and forgetting, wins and losses—underpins the anti-formative model of *Trümmerliteratur Redux* as an amorphous classificatory framework for post-1989 east European literature.

Such a framework has not only a substantial and unavoidable antecedent in literary history, but also an imposing corpus of texts to take in, offering the possibility for reflection not only about the literature of the east European ruins, but also about the ruins of east European literature itself. Moreover, if it is really so, as Andreas Huyssen writes, that “our culture is terminally ill with amnesia,” the often lonely figure of the ruin can be understood as a perhaps uncomfortable entreaty for us to reflect on the once was, the what is now, and the relationship between the two.

## APPENDIX

Personal e-mail communication from Dubravka Ugrešić to David Williams  
(August 8, 2011)

Činjenica je da se moji tekstovi mijenjaju od prijevoda do prijevoda, ali i od izdanja do izdanja. Ne bih rekla da su promjene krupne, i isto tako ne mislim da je moj vlastiti tekst koji je jednom otisnut nadalje i nepovrediv. Zašto i otkuda promjene? Dobri prevodioci obično komentiraju tekst. Ja volim takve prevodioce: njihov živ odnos prema mome tekstu izaziva moje načelno povjerenje.

Što se tiče *Ministarstva boli* pokazalo se da je 7. poglavlje Trećeg dijela romana sporno. U prvom izdanju pojavljuje se prilično opsežno predavanje koje drži studentica Meliha o temi povratka glavnoga junaka u domovinu, i o tome kako se ta tema razvija u hrvatskim i srpskim romanima od 19. stoljeća naovamo. Michael Henry Heim, engleski prevodilac, smatrao je da je to poglavlje dragocjeno za razumijevanje romana, dok su njemački i neki drugi prevodioci smatrali da je zamorno i da će otežati čitanje lokalnim čitaocima. Na kraju sam odlučila da poslušam glas većine. Izbacila sam to poglavlje i napisala novo i kraće, koje se, po mome mišljenju, bolje uklopilo u roman od prethodnoga.

Prilikom prijevoda romana na engleski Michael Heim i ja bili smo u prepisci. Njemu se nije sviđala pozicija pjesme Marine Cvetajeve u romanu. Pjesma se pojavljuje na početku romana, kao moto koji daje ton daljnjem pripovijedanju i otvara temu. Činilo mi se da nema boljeg početnog takta od te pjesme. Michael Heim smatrao je da pjesma spada u Epilog romana. U UK izdanju pjesma se pojavljuje kao dio Epiloga. U US izdanju pojavljuje se na početku, kao i u originalu. US izdanje izašlo je nakon UK izdanja. Nikako se nisam mogla naviknuti na ideju da pjesma stoji u Epilogu, a ne na početku kako je i bilo zamišljeno. Ta promjena pekla me je mnogo više od izostavljanja cijelog jednog poglavlja.

U međuvremenu se pojavilo i drugo izdanje *Ministarstva boli* na hrvatskom jeziku. Tom prilikom skinula sam sve citate koji su služili kao motoi pojedinih poglavlja. Naime, kada sam roman ponovo prečitavala pripremajući ga za drugo izdanje učinilo mi se da je tekst opterećen citatima, i iako je izbor citata bio zaista antologijski, zapitala sam se koja je njihova svrha. Kao da sam u jednom trenutku osjetila nesigurnost, kao da mi je trebala potvrda da nisam sama, kao da sam tim citiranjem htjela ojačati vlastitu poziciju. Motivacija da je Tanja Lucić naratorica romana, i da je ona nastavnica književnosti, te da je posve razumljivo da se tako profilirana junakinja služi književnim citatima, nije bila dovoljno uvjerljiva. Citati su ovdje služili kao neka vrsta književnih štaka, mojih, a ne Tanjinih.

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<sup>22</sup> A UK edition was published in 1992 by Virago Press (London).

<sup>23</sup> A UK edition was published in 1991 by Virago Press (London).

<sup>24</sup> A US edition was published in 1999 by New Directions (New York).

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