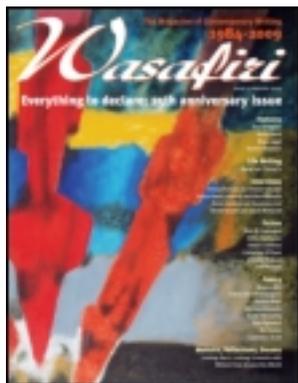


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# Europe in Sepia

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

Translated from post-Yugoslav by the author

Vedrana  
Veličković

Dubravka Ugrešić is a novelist and essayist living in Amsterdam. Although originally ‘from the Balkans’ (she was born in Croatia), Ugrešić has often described herself as an

‘ethnically inauthentic’ and ‘a-national’ writer. When her country, then Yugoslavia, slid into civil war in the 1990s, Ugrešić wrote against the war and the rising tide of aggressive and destructive nationalisms in Croatia and Serbia. Alongside other anti-war and feminist voices, she became a target of an intensive media campaign and was branded ‘a traitor’ and ‘a witch’. Ugrešić’s position as an already established writer in Yugoslavia – her critically acclaimed, prize-winning postmodern novels *In the Jaws of Life* and *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* were published in the 1980s – changed drastically and she left Croatia in 1993.

*This is a well-known story that must, nevertheless, be continually retold, even after twenty years. Because, ironically, Ugrešić has become known as one of the most renowned Croatian writers ‘outside the Balkans’ (read in the ‘West’), despite her refusal to identify with the ‘new’ ethnic or national labels when Yugoslavia disintegrated; while ‘back home’, until very recently, she would be referred to as a writer who went into a self-imposed exile and excluded from the body of ‘new’ Croatian literature redefined after the war. But maybe this is another familiar story about ‘the burden of representation’ and ‘the writer in exile’ and, as such writers know very well, perhaps there is something to be gained as well after exile. Ugrešić is a ‘Balkan’ writer as much as she is a European writer, a post-Yugoslav writer and a ‘world writer’. She is, more precisely, a ‘translator’ of loss, a careful archivist of the changes that have occurred throughout ‘Eastern Europe’ after 1989, of fragments of the Yugoslav cultural past and our contemporary popular culture. Her recent novels include *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1999), *The Ministry of Pain* (2005) and *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2009), and her recent books of essays are *The Culture of Lies* (1999), *Thank You for Not Reading* (2003), *Nobody’s Home* (2007) and *Karaoke Culture* (2011, winner of the Jean*

*Améry Essay Prize*). Ugrešić’s books have been translated into some twenty languages. In July 2013 she talked via email to Vedrana Veličković about her work.

**Vedrana Veličković** Dubravka, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to this Special Issue of *Wasafiri*, whose many contributors over the years have included ‘cultural travellers’ either through migration, transportation or else, in the more metaphorical sense of seeking an imagined cultural “home”. Could you talk a bit about your beginnings as a writer, how you started?

**Dubravka Ugrešić** Thank you for your welcome, although I am not sure I deserve the honorary title of a *wasafiri*. Erudites – those who have close knowledge of several languages, cultures and cultural traditions – are very rare. This is because literary *wasafirianism* demands great dedication, knowledge and energy, educational enthusiasm and an emancipated and enlightened form of missionary work. One such *wasafiri*, for example, was the late American professor Michael Henry Heim. As far as I’m concerned, I had opportunities to develop my interests in literature, film and art unusually early. Those interests, as well as my later choice of study (comparative literature and Russian language and literature) are, in essence, cosmopolitan. I don’t know much about how one becomes a writer, but I know that I have discovered very quickly, thanks to my mother who used to drag me to the cinema almost daily since I was three or four years old, that there are other autonomous worlds beside the obvious everyday ones. Film, and in particular Hollywood film, was for me what video games and Barbie dolls are for little girls today. My childhood was bereft of toys (because there simply weren’t any in post-war Yugoslavia) as well as of many other children’s attractions (from chocolate to today’s incredibly rich production for children). But there was a cinema and a library. If my mother deserves recognition for my film education, then I should thank our local librarian Margita for my literary education. Her pedagogical talent was almost non-existent and so was her respect for age differences. I was less than ten years old when Margita

introduced me to Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and many other books incompatible with my age. My mother was an avid reader herself, so I also had her books at my disposal. Her favourite books featured female characters in their very title (*Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Armance*, *The Lady of the Camellias*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and others). These books enabled me to experience the times beyond my own. So to summarise, in my early childhood I was exposed to Hollywood films, Greek myths, socialist legends about brave partisans and Tito, mother's books and Margita's books, while neither of them were really bothered by my age.

I had a taste of what it means to be a 'professional writer' very early. That is, I was already earning my pocket money as a fresher by writing screenplays for a children's TV programme and editorial columns for the children's supplement of a provincial newspaper. I published my first book (for children!) when I was twenty-one. The book won The Best Children's Book Award in Croatia. It also taught me an invaluable lesson; I gave up writing children's literature, having soon realised that I was actually not a very good writer for children, and then I realised literary awards were not necessarily proof that someone is also a good writer. I spent many years doing a literary apprenticeship. I studied comparative literature and Russian language and literature. I worked for twenty years at the University of Zagreb's Institute for Theory of Literature, translated two or three books from Russian, edited a couple of books and anthologies, wrote a dozen articles and a study of Russian literature. I think literary apprenticeship is important; today one becomes a writer without it. Apprenticeship carries an important pedagogical message; you must do something first for literature in order to gain the right to write yourself. Today, everyone can become a writer without the apprenticeship and this is one of the reasons for this unbearable flood of literary amateurism.

**WV** In 1981 you published your 'patchwork' novel *In the Jaws of Life* [orig. *Štefica Cvek u Rajjama Života*]. It challenged some of those forms of literary amateurism – in this case the genre of mass-market romances – one could say long before the advent of what we now call 'chick-lit'. What was it like to be a woman writer in Yugoslavia in the 1980s, and would your main protagonist, Steffie Cvek, today be defeated by popular novels such as those by E L James?

**DU** I must say that I felt lonely and isolated when I was writing *Steffie*, as a literary model, a pattern, a style or a movement I could follow did not exist. Rather, I was guided by an understanding of literature that was soaked in like a sponge from my reading of the Russian Formalists, and by my very own literary intuition that, by the way, proved to be visionary. This, of course, I only realise now after thirty years. There is a sentence in *Steffie*:

Not only does she wish to imitate the precision of the 'Instructions for Finishing the Garment' from the aforementioned fashion magazine; she also wishes to achieve the best possible tracing of her model. Incidentally, tracing is where the author sees the immediate future of literature.

My short story collection *Life is a Fairytale* can be seen as an attempt to realise this claim and, when it was published (1983), it was read in the postmodernist key. There is a character of Mr Flagus (Flaubert's cousin) in my novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* who prophetically announces the *Mcdonaldisation* of literature, 'literary hamburgers' and a totalitarian control of literature, which one can easily attribute to our global literary market where literature is reduced to a commodity and the author to a content provider. All of the above claims have, unfortunately, come true, including the first one about tracing. Today we are living the future of literature (and of art in general) that was announced then: the strategy of plagiarism, violation of authorship, cut and paste techniques, fan fiction, collaborative fiction, cell literature, *Twitterature* and other literary and art remixes. I have tried to define these changes in my latest collection of essays as 'karaoke culture', that is, as our contemporary and predominantly digital culture.

But let us go back thirty years. To be a woman writer in the 1980s was probably the same as being a woman writer today, although today the number of women who write and participate in literary life as editors, journalists, literary critics and theorists is far greater. The problem is that male colleagues have been unwilling to change. But what has changed significantly is the very status and treatment of literature. Unlike today, thirty years ago literature was still considered an important human activity in which many were involved: the critics and professors of literature (the criticism was longer and the space in newspapers, on radio and TV generally dedicated to culture was much greater), literary magazines were thicker. University literature departments were far more engaged and committed to literature. And so were the readers. Thirty years ago, for example, Milan Kundera was the bestselling author in Yugoslavia. His novels had something important to say about ourselves and our times. Today, literary taste has been degraded and trivialised, and excellence and professionalism (in literature, art, music, journalism, philosophy etc) has been replaced with the phenomenon of celebrity culture. In Zagreb and Belgrade today, local celebrities organise parties where they are photographed with a Croatian or Serbian edition of E L James's book in hand. The media then reports about it and this is what the large majority is interested in: promotion, fame, money. I'm afraid the terms 'intellectual life' and 'the intellectual' have almost disappeared and, if they do appear, then they do so in the form of a media spectacle (as noisy festivals and discussions supported by visual media) where everyone seems to speak over each other. International seminars in Dubrovnik in the 1980s were visited by renowned academics and writers from around the world (I remember a seminar with Malcolm Bradbury, Terry Eagleton and David Lodge). Both the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the war have resulted in a cultural and intellectual parochialism. It is so deep that it has become invisible. When you try to talk about it, many people don't understand what you are saying because bookshops in Zagreb are not that different from any other bookshop in Europe in their choice of books, apart from the fact that books are catalogued by titles in computers or, in the case of books in translation, by the translated title.

And then, it is true that in socialism culture mattered greatly and was treated rather differently than it is today due to various reasons, so the erosion of cultural value systems coincided in parallel with the erosion of communism, and this has happened elsewhere — in Russia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary. I was recently in Budapest. There used to be a cinema where visitors, mainly foreigners, could watch the best films of Hungarian cinematography. That cinema no longer exists and no one seems to be interested in Hungarian film. But my generation was interested in it, not only because there was a reciprocal cultural exchange between Hungarian and Yugoslav film, but because there was a strong intellectual interest in Hungarian, Czech and Polish film, Polish theatre, Polish, Czech and Hungarian literature. Today our literary and artistic taste has been standardised and our consumption of literary products is based on purchasing the novel that has won the Booker Prize and the literature one can find in every bookshop. And almost all bookshops in the Euro-American world have some twenty same books on their stands. They are, indeed, always Anglo-American.

And let me answer your question about Steffie Cvek. No, I don't think such postmodern intervention can be subversive today. I'm afraid readers no longer know what literary language is, what the language of literature is, how to read a literary text or what literary subversion is. The readers seem to look for some kind of a reality show in everything. In other words, one day it might happen that *Steffie Cvek* is banned. Why? Because of many things: she has problems with her weight, so she is a bad role model for young women (I recently watched an American TV show where a fitness instructor claimed how British singer Adele is dangerous for American women because, given that she is famous, she is sending a wrong message to them that being fat is OK!). Then, Steffie is depressive; she is, to use the old communist slang, a defeatist. However, our contemporary democratic societies cherish the same communist opposition; to be depressive, a defeatist, a pessimist and a sceptic is dangerous for a healthy society. A couple of years ago, *Steffie* was translated into Polish. The readers then immediately noticed that *Steffie* undoubtedly parodies *Bridget Jones*. *Steffie* was published in 1981. *Bridget Jones* began its life in a newspaper column in 1995 (the film was made in 2001). Those two texts bear no common relation whatsoever. *Steffie* has much more in common with Shklovsky and Tinyanov than with *Bridget*. Even the very *Bridget Jones* has little to do with *Bridget Jones* and much more with Jane Austen. Different literary traditions, different narrative strategies, different times of creation. However, readers often make connections between the two heroines, because they seem to read literary texts in the same way as they watch reality TV. Of course, the answer is not that simple. It is much more complex than that because the changes that have happened in the meantime are also complex.

**W** In your fiction and essays, you write about these changes and other so-called post-communist transitions. Your new book of essays is entitled *Europe in Sepia* (forthcoming 2014 in English translation by Open Letter Books). Is this a continuation of your 'archival' work and

critical engagement with nostalgia? I have in mind here Svetlana Boym's work on reflective nostalgia.

**DU** A storyteller (which is what I am or one of my narrative masks) and a writer of essays is some kind of a nomad, and postcommunist transition, among many other things, is interwoven in her life experience and in her focus. This, however, is not the only topic of my essays. I change geographical locations; at one point I'm in Istanbul, Turin, Bratislava, Ghent, Krakow and, at another, I'm in Budapest, Zagreb, Stockholm, Amsterdam. But my geographical position is not important — my essays are not traveller's accounts. Different geographical points are there to mark the space or actually to dematerialise it, sending a message that similar things happen at many places in this world. I do not care much about objectivity; rather, I insist on subjectivity. Everything is perceived and told from my own perspective. My perspective is marginal, floating at the surface, melancholic. Despite such a perspective, the reader might have the feeling that after reading the book they have found themselves in a (European) (epi)centre. A pretty ambitious demand, don't you think? For me, essays offer maximum narrative freedom and I think I have used it fully. This has nothing to do with freedom of expression and freedom of mind, a pamphleteering arrogance convinced of breaking certain constraints and bringing with it a new freedom; it is about the act of literary creation which, I dare say, is 'poetic'. What would this mean? It seems to me that poetry is the most indirect and, at the same time, the fastest way to penetrate into the very essence of things. I try to do the same in my essays and I apologise immediately for my lack of modesty.

**W** The representations of the Balkans and Eastern Europe have been the subject of many academic studies in recent years. Has the label 'made in the Balkans' affected you as a writer?

**DU** Certainly, it has. We are talking here about works in translation, about the reception of my books in the countries where they have been translated and published. Reviewers, critics, academics and, finally, readers all tend to over-read meaning into a text; to 'balkanise' a text because it comes from the Balkans; to read a text with stereotypical expectations; to overlook, for example, humorous nuances (because it seems to them that in a text that comes from the Balkans recently ravaged by war, there should not be any) and narrative strategies; to treat a literary text like a piece of journalism; and to relate it to the place from which its author comes rather than to what the text actually offers. However, we all tend to do this; if a text comes from South America, we tend to read it in the 'magical realist' key, don't you think? The question is whether the same text is read in a more just and richer manner 'at home', in the space of the former Yugo-zone? Unfortunately it is not. A text is there burdened with other expectations and standards, and such over-readings at home reduce and cripple the text even more. At home, the author's blood group is still important above everything else and such over-readings come from the very top, from university professors and academics at



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literature departments. Unlike the readings at home, serious academic circles abroad provide most opportunities for *the Balkan text* to be read productively. As for my own works, I have had positive experiences. There are wonderful readers elsewhere — there are not many of them, but they do exist. Communication with such readers is the most exciting and, because of them, literary communication makes sense. After all, such readers give meaning to what I do. I do not think it would be an overstatement to say that such readers are keeping me alive. They include my publishers and translators, all those enthusiasts who made it possible for my book to appear in a foreign language, all those students of literature, critics, academics and researchers like you Vedrana, and young, non-conventional comparativists-theorists such as David Williams, whose book *Writing Post communism, Towards A Literature Of The East European Ruins* is partly based on my books.

**W** I recently read a newspaper headline, ‘Croats say hello to the EU and goodbye to the Balkans’. A commentator called this need to escape the Balkans — a *Eurosis*. How do you diagnose it?

**D**U That is a good diagnosis — a *Eurosis*. But this kind of neurosis has been caused by EU’s exclusive club politics, because the EU is a sort of a club and, like any other club, it operates on the principle of exclusion. Only the devoted may join, while others wait at its doors. You know, in the Soviet Union in those times when you had to wait in queues for everything, people used to stand in the queue and wait even without knowing what was on sale thinking that, if others are queuing, something worth waiting for must be on sale.

Newly joined states, like the latest arrival Croatia, are treated like children and they too behave like children. So

if a neurosis exists, it is only infantile. A child is asking for its ice cream and is ready to toss about on the floor if it does not get it, and the adults ask from the child to adapt to their rules of the game, such as to respect the principle of reciprocity. A child does not yet understand the principle of reciprocity, but explores instead the space of its own powers. Croatia says farewell to the Balkans by giving them the finger in the same way the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary did, although they were giving the finger to Russia. The fact that Russian oligarchs could buy the whole of Croatia, use it as their exclusive spa and employ all Croatians, starting from the Croatian government, as their manicurists and pedicurists if they only wanted to, doesn’t affect the Croatians’ good mood at joining the club of the powerful. And then one should be aware that there are other clubs as well. Albert II of Belgium allegedly sent this message to his subjects: ‘If you misbehave, I’ll sell you to Bill Gates’.

**W** During the war of the 1990s, you unwillingly inherited a couple of other labels — for example, you ‘became’ a witch as well as a writer in exile. A crippling position or – forgive me for misusing the title of your last novel – a proud ‘Baba Yagan’ inheritance?

**D**U Baba Yaga lives in exile and is a dissident in every respect. However, her position is ambivalent. She is a cripple because she is old, because she is unable to walk and can barely see, because she lives in a house that only adds to her disability as it is too small and its ceiling is not high enough for the length of her nose. On the other hand, physical disability or some kind of physical eccentricity characterises all mythological creatures and they all have supernatural powers. Baba Yaga may not even be able to walk, but she can fly in her giant mortar. Her tiny, narrow house is a form of an aid (the house is mobile, rotates around itself and it is impossible to come in without Baba Yaga’s permission). Baba Yaga knows the tricks of metamorphosis (from an ugly hag she can turn into a beautiful woman) and she is also a kind of a hermaphrodite: she can be hyper-fertile as an egg-laying hen (with forty daughters!) as well as grotesquely feminised (with breasts so long that she has to hang them up on a beam), even though she does not have a man by her side. An indication that Baba Yaga may be a man can be found in the detail about her excellent knowledge of horses and tobacco snuffing. In the Soviet TV adaptations of Russian fairy tales from the 1940s, Baba Yaga was regularly performed by male actors. She lives at the edge of the woods, but she can communicate freely with both worlds — the world of people and the parallel world of supernatural creatures, the work of the dead etc.

A witch, a writer in exile, Baba Yaga — look, it turns out I have nothing to be ashamed of in my biography!

**W** Are *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Ministry of Pain* your last post-Yugoslav novels?

**D**U Yes, probably, although perhaps I should explain. I think the terrain of ‘post-Yugoslav’ is as slippery as the field of national literatures. Paradoxically, globalisation, the market and high technology are taking us back into narrow national

frames. Search the internet a little. My internet tags are grouped solely by the principle of ethnicity and nationality. As soon as you type up my name I would, for example, be tagged alongside little images of contemporary Croatian writers. Why not Dutch writers? Am I not a Dutch citizen? Take a look at how the literary market operates — solely on the principle of exchange of ethnically and nationally branded intellectual goods. In other words, high technology has reduced us to our tribal identification. Soon the qualification ‘post-Yugoslav’ will disappear, even before anyone tries to explain what the term actually means.

**V** In ‘old Europe’ and in Britain today, we witness, almost daily, all kinds of anxieties about the so-called ‘New Europe’ and particularly towards Romanians and Bulgarians. There has also been a rise in the number of fictional and film representations of ‘Eastern European’ migrants.

**D** I think some form of a *cultural text* is being created again, a cultural package that may be called by the working title of ‘New Europe’ — why not? That package satisfies the fantasies of a West European cultural consumer after the fall of the Wall. It is as if New Europe had to fill in the void that was created with the disappearance of the Cold War imaginary and claim ownership of the artistic exploitation of themes such as bleak, post-industrial people who trade with their own bodies, sexual economy, sexual exploitation of New European women as well as men (such as the 2009 Polish film *Swinki* in which Polish boys living in a small town at the Polish–German border make money by offering their bodies to solvent German adults). Then there is the violence, alienation, cruelty, alcoholism, drugs, crime. There was also the so-called Black Wave cinema in Yugoslavia in the 1970s. We may use the Russian slang *chernuha* to describe today’s New European production which, in loose translation, means art that is bleak and dark. This is their most attractive and, perhaps, strongest artistic export. It includes, first of all, films: Romanian films that are already well known in the world market; new Russian films, screenwriters and playwrights; Polish films and new Polish literature (particularly women writers). In literature, we mainly have young narrators, both male and female, who speak in unconventional language full of slang and expletives and describe the world of post-communist hopelessness, poverty, cynicism and violence in which they find themselves. New Serbian film is particularly interesting in this regard. The film *White, White World* is, in my opinion, one of the artistically most exciting examples of the New European *chernuha*. The film is a generic melange of a Greek drama, a soap opera, a musical and a Brechtian play. It is set against the background of a post-industrial copper mine in [the Eastern Serbian town of] Bor, and the final scene ends masterfully with a large group of gathered workers, comprised of both real workers and extras, singing their sad closing song.

**V** As we speak, artists and cultural workers in Belgrade are holding a protest demonstration against the degradation of culture in Serbia. But after decades of degradation of all

aspects of life throughout the former Yugoslavia and beyond, do you see any reasons to be hopeful about the current cultural and literary production in the Balkans?

**D** Rumour has it that the current Serbian Culture Minister, a playwright by occupation, comes from a family of bakers. The managing director of a publishing house that I published a book or two with before the war became a member of Tudjman’s party and later left publishing to become a police sergeant. Post-communist systems have adopted the communist practice that only members of the ruling party can hold prominent positions. So the hospital ward managers are not top doctors but members of the ruling party. The ruling parties do not appoint professional people but their own loyal supporters. That is why it is entirely possible that bakers, playwrights and policemen are in charge of culture and cultural workers dream of becoming the heads of police and bakers. Luckily, good art does not arise because of or out of ideal circumstances. It certainly does not arise out of bad circumstances.

Good films, theatre scripts, books, visual art — they all already exist. The problem is how to find and see them, because we live in a world littered by trash. Trash penetrates from everywhere, through phone receivers, the internet and TV; it crawls underneath our doors and occupies our space. It does not want to leave us alone and always wants to be the centre of attention. Trash is aggressive and loud, capable of out-speaking and overpowering everything. The question is how to enable good and interesting (and presumably worthwhile) art to flourish? This requires a joint effort by those who enable the realisation of art projects (translators, publishers, museums, galleries, film funds and foundations, bookstores, critics) and the artists themselves.

**V** Do you see yourself as a permanent melancholic? That is, after the end of utopias, do you think we can reclaim defeatism or despair as an effective critical position today?

**D** The end is always the new beginning of a new start. We all seem to live in the expectation of the beginning, although we are not yet aware of it. A friend of mine recently told me something I quite liked: ‘Time has taken its toll on me and, rather oddly, I’m in no pain!’ It is true — we’re in no pain. Because only real changes can hurt. The change we are witnessing is the phenomenon of virtual worlds and the digital revolution. We explain our infatuation with the technological changes as a real, revolutionary change. And look, we have become addicts; all of us take a daily dose of the information ‘soma’ (via the internet, social networks, Facebook, Twitter) and frivolously think this is quite a satisfactory ending: no more history, communism, repression, slavery, everyone has the right to express their individuality, their gender, political, national, racial, ethnic and religious identity. Yes, the utopias are gone and so are the future projections, but we live longer; that is, the older we get the younger we are and, as long we have a twenty-four-hour access to Wi-Fi, we are fine.