

IMAGING THE PAST: CULTURAL MEMORY IN DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ'S *THE MUSEUM OF UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER*

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"You've got five minutes to take your albums and get out!" This puzzling order is given by a Serbian general shelling Sarajevo to a Bosnian friend whose house he decides to target next. The bizarre war scene is captured by Yugoslavian-born author Dubravka Ugrešić in a vignette-essay titled "The Culture of Lies" and is retold by the narrator in Ugrešić's acclaimed novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1996; 1998 in English). "The General," Ugrešić explains, "meant family photograph albums. Before destroying everything he owned, the General had 'generously' bequeathed his chosen victim life together with the right to memory, life with a few family snapshots" (70). This sense of urgency surrounding photographs might seem ill-placed at a time of war when human lives are at stake, yet Ugrešić's stress on photographic memory reveals her anxiety that cultural memory and history could have been and were manipulated during the conflicts in former Yugoslavia by the different warring parties in order to obtain legitimation. Beyond its artistic merits, Ugrešić's writing on photography illuminates the retrieval and construction of cultural memory in Eastern Europe in general, and in Yugoslavia in particular, after 1989.

Photographs are at the core of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*: family albums destroyed by the onset of the war in Bosnia, personal photographs that open a window onto life between the wars and the hardships of post World War II day-to-day existence, verbal snapshots clicked-off by the narrator out of the banal circumstances of her life in exile, and images in flea markets where the past is for sale. The narrator is a Croatian academic forced into exile by the war that broke out in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.¹ She lives in isolation in Berlin, where internal beacons immediately identify her countrymen; these

modest encounters constitute the launching point of memories about her life in Yugoslavia. They open her up towards representations of the past and present and alert her to the recomposition of old and new narratives of belonging, borders, foreignness, and nationhood. A good part of the novel revolves around the narrator's mother; the elder woman's worries and isolation at a time of war are transcribed from her diary. A separate chapter focuses on the narrator's best friends, university professors like her, and the feasts of food and memories they used to organize in Zagreb. Thus, the novel does not follow a traditional plot. Structured according to vignettes and memory snapshots, it mixes together episodes of Berlin loneliness, touching moments about neighbors in exile, meditations on contemporary art installations, and reminiscences of Yugoslavia at different times in the narrator's life. There are bits about childhood education and the impact of the ideologically laden primer; pieces about life in a little town where the seamstress, with her powers to transform her clientele, was a much revered character; and reminiscences of lessons in ladylike behavior that bore no consequence in the terse communist world. Other stories are gathered around a common theme, like those composing the chapter "Archive: six stories with the discreet motif of a departing angel."

Ugrešić refuses to give an easy coherence to the structure of her novel but announces encouragingly that "if the reader feels that there are no meaningful or firm connections between [the vignettes], let him be patient: the connections will establish themselves of their own accord" (*Museum* xi). These collections of ekphrastic photographs and albums rework the topoi of museum and memory preservation, maintaining vitality and the arresting message of the material. Photographs, real or verbal, act as documents that both attest to the reality they grasp and to their modifiable, subjective power of witness. Ugrešić's novel is mostly about women and female memory; it combines the gentleness and melancholy of the genre with the subtlety of positioning her work within a larger debate about visual material, photography, and memory preservation. The shape of the work is strikingly postmodern: the fragmentary narratives and images remind the reader of the impossibility of totalizing narratives, the potential freshness of approaching life from smaller bits, but also the bitter reality of a country shattered by war. Yet postmodernism is a label that fails to capture the ethically engaged nature of the work and the novelty of its approach.

The collapse of European socialist regimes revealed a widespread skepticism of communist historiographic methods, which combined Marxism with totalitarian practices. Many East European scholars cautiously opened their research towards a postmodern approach regarding historical truth, the subjective intrusion of the researcher, and a potential blurring of lines between historical narrative and literary text. Yugoslavia, kept outside the Soviet orbit by Tito's non-aligned politics, allowed its scholars and writers a higher degree of methodological freedom and censored them less. Translations of dissident

writers from the Soviet Union and its satellites were readily available (Tighe 142), and writers enjoyed a strangely unregulated book market that valorized literature. There was only one taboo: nationalism (Ugrešić, *Culture* 37). After World War II an inclusive, supranational “Yugoslav literary and artistic canon that was interpreted as embodying desired traits of national unity” (Wachtel 5) was created, yet it relied solely on the power of Tito’s socialist model to weave an integrated “imagined community.” The fragmentation of this grand narrative of brotherhood and unity resulted uncannily not in a distrust of totalizing historical narratives, as one would have expected at a time when both literature and history were making room for post-structuralist skepticism, but in a resurgence of essentializing ethnic nationalisms.

Having had a long and prolific dialogue with postmodernism, Ugrešić gives its concepts, specifically Lyotard’s suspicion of grand narratives, an instrumental value but pursues a less skeptical solution. The postmodern leanings of her earlier writings make her acknowledge that documents and testimonies are falsifiable and easy to regiment under one ideology or another. Yet this acknowledgement does not validate a skeptical denial of truth; rather, it triggers a more alert consciousness and an intensified process of demystification. Even when she uses fiction as a modality to retrieve the past, she implicitly brings a specific solution to scholarly debates about memory and history.

Memory in Post-communist Eastern Europe

The past two or three decades have witnessed an assault against the notion of “objective history.” Staged from various disciplines and fields (cultural studies, history, sociology, postmodern literature, and criticism), this assault has recovered the narrative form as a prestigious historiographic method, acknowledging the interference of the writer’s subjectivity. Following the publication of Hayden White’s *Metahistory*, scholars have emphasized the narrative aspect of history writing, scrutinized the “emplotment” of historical events, stressed the subjectivity of the researcher, and relativized the notion of historical truth. This approach has also questioned the boundaries between history and literature writing. Even if many historians prefer not to subscribe to the “narrative turn” as they outline the temptations of relativism and the implicit challenges to the structure of their discipline, it is difficult for anyone to ignore its existence.

This epistemologically relaxed context has granted authority to individual testimonies and cultural memory and has complicated the relationship between academic history and memory. As Ugrešić observes: “Things with a past are not simple. Particularly in a time when we are witnesses and participants in a general trend of turning away from stable, ‘hard’ history in favor of changeable and ‘soft’ memory (ethnic, social, group, class, race, gender, personal and alien)” (*Culture* 221-22). Simultaneously, official versions of history have

been suspected of carrying the partial truth of a privileged group. Western scholars and philosophers (with Lyotard at the forefront) have contested “grand narratives” (especially the narratives of modernization and teleological evolution of history) and universalizing systems of thought, while they shifted the emphasis to small-scale narrative projects without a claim to absolute objectivity or truth. European communist states not only falsified history but also undermined their subjects’ belief in historical truth. The blatant visibility of these historical forgeries imbued the population with a cynical perspective on the truth value of any explanatory historical narrative; Eastern Europeans rejected not just the teleology of Marxism but also the possibility of creating or accepting grand narratives about the world (see Holmes 41).²

In most formerly communist countries, the public manifested a desire to set the text of history right, to expose the gaps and enforced silences in communist historiography, and to recuperate some of the previously ill-favored historical figures. A similar process of reversion took place in the former Yugoslav countries: if in the early 1990s communism came to be depicted as the absolute evil, local opponents such as the royalist Serb Četniks and the fascist Croat Ustaše, after whom streets and places have been named, have been recuperated as heroes of their respective nations (Fine 181). Yet, this process of purging history books of figures belonging to the previous regime and reinstating older national heroes is different: in Yugoslavia it serves new nationalist purposes and has fired up inter-ethnic hatred. The new states solidified new national myths and created new heroes. According to Ugrešić, “National mythomania is confirmed by ‘serious’ claims about the Iranian origin of the Croats and popular phrases about the Croatian state as the ‘thousand-year dream of all Croats’” (*Culture* 81).

Ugrešić conceives of local phenomena as residing at the intersection between a larger postmodern frame of mind in the Western world and nationalist beliefs created and imposed by the successor states of Yugoslavia: “In all the former Yugoslav territories people are now living a postmodern chaos. Past, present and future are all lived simultaneously. In the circular temporal mish-mash suddenly everything we ever knew and everything we shall know has sprung to life and gained its right to existence” (*Culture* 83-84). Thus, her work itself arises at a most peculiar junction: the writer—influenced by postmodernism and aligned with the political disenchantment of other Eastern European writers—was bombarded with “national mythomania” and urged to lie, if necessary, in the name of a happy future of her country. She depicts herself as keeping a disgusted distance from nationalist demagoguery (her collection *Culture of Lies* bears the subtitle *Antipolitical Essays*). Ambiguity and self-interrogation of her practices make *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* a text that resists political regimentation. Instead of proclaiming a comfortable autonomy of literature (as she was tempted to do before the war), Ugrešić maintains her duty as a writer to reveal if not the elusive naked truth then

the mechanisms through which society appropriates, distorts, and refashions it. Aside from the high quality of her writing, this intricate positioning makes her stand out in the landscape of Eastern European literature. Equally remarkable is her take on cultural memory and history: her postmodern sensibility makes her acknowledge the impossibility of an absolute truth (always touched up by the subjectivity of the researcher, narrator, or creators of documents), yet she promotes the intellectual's moral duty to pursue it nonetheless. And as a woman, she advocates and achieves a gendered perspective on memory.

Photographic Memory

Several methods of photograph analysis present themselves to the reader of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*: meditation on the art-technology nexus in Benjaminian fashion; reflection on death (the camera as a “weapon” that objectifies and arrests the subject); considerations on the mimetic and objective versus the subjective and modifiable nature of photographic material; contemplation of pictures as “pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (Sontag 16); and, most importantly, reflections on photography as “a twilight art” (15) and therefore a promoter of nostalgia. The last route is most favored by disciples of psychoanalysis since it enables introspections into the constructed nature of identity, mourning, loss, and nostalgia. Ugrešić anticipates these critical frames and, to a certain extent, preempts them by quoting and incorporating the most famous meditations on photography in her own reflections. She pastes into her novel the insights of Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, and Roland Barthes, as well as references to art installations that make use of photography, bracketed within quotation marks, assembled and dismembered, used as leit-motifs or starting points of dialectical movements. While any of these approaches is legitimate, Ugrešić manages to defamiliarize photography to make the life of pictures more unpredictable and to reflect both on life in exile and on the predicament of memory in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Thus, in her writing, the topic of photography becomes exiled from its traditional approaches. This illuminates not necessarily an antithetical structure to older approaches but slippages, derailings, and peculiar “afterlife” moments in the trajectory of pictures, which become the hallmark of their historical circumstances: deracination, disruption of national boundaries, migration, war, and the chaotic cultural phenomena of Eastern European transitions.

Striking images of collections (incongruous objects ingurgitated by a walrus, a familial treasure tucked away in the mother's handbag, Berlin flea markets) clash with the rigidity of institutionalized memory. In a Yugoslav space with a past completely revamped according to the nationalist feelings of its various ethnic groups, the distrust of official history and memory is increasingly important. The new museums and collections that Ugrešić discovers and inaugurates subvert the formality of traditional genres of memory preservation. A wide spectrum of forms of museums, collections,

and photo albums opens up, some of them with a colonizing outcome, others spectacularly anti-structural. Ugrešić wants to break the incipient coherence of these genres of memory preservation since such coherence inevitably leads to the creation of “museums of unconditional surrender.”³ Her novel is not a celebration of exile, displacement, the breaking of national boundaries, and the chaos of everyday life. On the contrary, the bitterness of this new lifestyle and a certain nostalgia for a more rooted past imbue her novel. But she attempts to make the best of this new condition, to find sources of rejuvenation, and to prevent memories from becoming pain—the pain of returning home, as the etymology of the word nostalgia suggests. The force of the new emerges from the interruptions and caesuras of older narratives. From the discontinuous. From insertions into traditional genres that disrupt them from within. From random recombinations. From what is odd. Fragmentation opposes static and stale meanings. Thus, fluid forms of memory are both ways of rejecting official historiography and means of giving coherence to life in exile, away from a country whose borders have become fragmented under the pressure of history at the beginning of the 1990s.

As a genre, if such a genre exists beyond its multiplicity of forms, the museum has been dismantled as a container of memory that uses its collections to construct and reinforce a group narrative to the exclusion of marginal and dissonant voices (see Bennett and Anderson). This is the museum of unconditional surrender, where identity becomes contaminated by a “heavy, stale, sweetish smell” (*Museum* 224). Ugrešić’s interest in this genre occurs at the crucial moment when the new countries built from Yugoslavia’s pieces create and reinforce nationalist narratives, historical sites, and institutions that offer cohesion and legitimation. Concurrently, there is an international (postmodern) interest towards musealization (*Culture* 222). Yet museums come in different forms and with various purposes. What is important for the author is to sabotage the attempt at a coherent genre, to discover that despite the care that goes into labeling past life, a “confused archeologist [has] been leaving the wrong labels everywhere” (*Museum* 221). Labels such as “museums,” “collections,” and “photo albums” are relative because these forms of memory preservation flow and ebb into each other, borrowing strategies and recreating themselves anew as genres.

Although structured along visual lines, the photo album is a way of writing the past and impressing it on the leaves of a codex into a more or less coherent narrative. Ugrešić emphasizes the similarity between two forms of transcribing memory: photographs work side by side with “verbal snapshots.” On the wide spectrum of memory preservation, the photo album, with its unpremeditated photographic errors and its focus on the small familial group instead of national narratives, is a step away from the museified past. The album arranged by the narrator’s mother simultaneously proposes a coherent narrative and lays bare the hiatuses in the storyline, the missing pages in the history of life: “This

everyday life was arranged (by the mere fact of being posed), then it was re-sorted (through the selection of photographs), but—perhaps just because of an amateur artistic impulse that the facts of life should be nicely arranged—it sprang up in the gaps, in the mistakes, in the method itself, touchingly authentic and alive” (21-22). Mixed up with “currents of new life”—“a piece of torn-off paper with the name of a face cream, someone’s telephone number, a newspaper cutting about where to buy special door locks and alarms” (25)—albums, in general, betray their false enclosure and reassuring containment of life material. These “bookmarks,” which belong to a different register of life—the present—break the boundaries of organized remembrance and restore the intertextuality of the life story.

An even more chaotic collection cascades out of the pigskin bag that the narrator’s mother tucked away in the corner of the closet. Womb-like receptacle and container of the past, her mother’s bag is both a signifier of the feminine forms of memory storage and an ironic stab at patriarchal classifications of archetypal feminine spaces. “The beginning of this story is hidden in a lady’s pigskin bag” (13), a repository that intentionally mirrors the photo album covers that replaced it in the later years. A pigskin bag is a photo album in becoming, which in turn is a museum in becoming. But the movement can also be reversed, and highly institutional forms of museification fall into the chaotic day-to-day existence or are scattered with the disintegration of the social forms that created them. It is this atypical life of photographs and its relation to memory or forgetting that Ugrešić traces in her novel.

The (After)life of Family Photo Albums

Theorists of photography have often pointed to the subjective character of the gaze of the camera, the studied nature of composition, and the possibility of touching up or even completely erasing details or characters in a photograph. However, the picture has not ceased to carry a sense of authenticity. It is considered a testimonial if not of the events it has recorded at least of the material circumstances that predicated the shooting of the photograph. For Roland Barthes, the function of representation is swallowed up by the function of authentication: “in front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the path of memory...but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty: the photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents” (85). Despite the possibility of meddling with the photograph’s mimetic dimension, pictures have been conceptualized as elements with unique attribution. A photograph has an indexical function: it leads almost invariably to its subject. The photograph stages a piece of the owner’s past be it within the personal life span or that of the family members in whose life the owner traces his or her ascendancy. In Ugrešić’s novel, this unique link can be severed. As a result of the new, fragmented patterns of life, family photo albums are sold at flea-markets; the past is subject to purchase and reappropriation, and the new

owners are not interested in reconstituting the broken link between image and referent: “At the Berlin flea-markets one can buy a photograph album for a mark or two. The albums lie in heaps. Some of them have photographs spilling out of them, some are worn, some empty, some quite new” (*Museum* 229). Sold blank or overloaded with pictures, these albums have their former identities flushed out while they are colonized by new ones. The past can receive a new present. How can we understand this peculiar (after)life of family albums?

While people consume, evaluate, and appreciate art photography on the art market, family photo albums, with the exception of those associated with celebrities, live outside this circuit. They are created to illustrate on a small scale the history of the family and are meant for contemplation and enjoyment within the circle of close friends. Family photographs belong in the personal album, and the album belongs at home. Pulled out of their homes, decontextualized, they are scrutinized with different eyes, which make their flaws and assumptions more evident. Ugrešić meditates on the functional similarities (and dissimilarities) between national museums and family albums. If the photo album institutes and sanctifies the family history, when removed from the milieu that formed and buttressed its more or less coherent narrative, it becomes demythologized. In *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch recalls her attempts to rescue some photographs representing her grandmother from a cousin who, not knowing who the subject was, found them amusing, trivial, and easy to discard (xi). The albums and the disparate photographs sold at the Berlin flea-markets have entered a new cultural circuit that relies on different values than the ones for which they were intended. The new owner will scrutinize them with critical or nostalgic eyes; yet, irrespective of his or her frame of mind, his or her interest will lie not with the personal life of the subject(s) but with the *modus vivendi* to which they testify. In the case of pictures brought to Berlin by refugees from Yugoslavia, the photos become a pre-text for revisiting the past and reconstituting a world that has vanished.

The ex-Yugoslavians (both vendors and customers) who haunt the flea markets and try to identify in the crowd some new face who is “one of us” (*Museum* 232) are not interested in reconstituting or rescuing the dossiers of a particular life other than their own. Instead, they are alert to Yugoslav merchandise and photographs as traces of a lifestyle and country that no longer exist. The photo albums become maps to the past: “Here, in Gustav-Meyer Allee, on Saturdays and Sundays, the country that is no more, Bosnia, draws its map once again in the air, with its towns, villages, rivers, and mountains” (230). The mixed-up and disparate photographs as well as all the other odds and ends of East European origin reconstitute, in a distorted and amalgamated fashion, the map of a land that has come to pieces under the pressure of ethnic wars but that lives on in memory.

The severing of the ties between a personal photo (or album) and its owner becomes characteristic of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the larger

international frame of exile and migration. Throughout all her works written in the 1990s, Ugrešić juxtaposes the ethnic wars to a general postmodern frame of mind as origins for contemporary uprootedness. Pictures as fragments of a life story are scattered and reappropriated. Although it would seem that, entering their afterlife, these albums and disparate pictures have lost their memory charge, instead they have moved from a mostly private to a public form of memory. With Ugrešić, fragmentation does not equal dissolution; rather it constitutes the very conditions necessary for rebirth to a new form of life. Fragmentation enlivens fossilized narratives and reveals the assumptions on which they were based; fragmentation lays bare the identity grids that turn institutionalized memory into “museums of unconditional surrender.” Thus Ugrešić distances herself from an easy postmodern celebration of fragmentation, yet she refuses to play into the hands of the new nationalist narratives of continuity and rootedness that emerged in Croatia and Serbia.

While Ugrešić infuses the commercialization of family albums with a sense of mourning of the scattering or displacement of individual life dossiers, she also celebrates this dispersion as the beginning of a new life. A good example is her description of Christian Marclay’s art exhibit:

The photographs were pinned to the wall face down. From their backs one could see that they were old, on some of them the photographer’s stamp could be made out, on some a dedication could be read....It looked as though the walls had been colonised by some unusual plant. Just pinned to the wall, a little deformed with age, the photographs breathed a very exciting life. (230)

In Ugrešić’s novel, the almost fossilized, undifferentiated past can be salvaged through incorporation, embodiment, or return to the animate. The genealogy traced by the “unusual plant” on the wall is not that of an individual but of scattered and reassembled forms of communitarian life under the pressures of exile. Although it appears to be colonizing in form, it actually infuses the pictures with a new life. The anonymous photographs pinned face-down now attest to the material circumstances in which they were taken as well as to emerging patterns of memory in exile. The latter are predicated on fragments; shuffled and amalgamated documents, and, most of all, on the “walking museum pieces” who retrace with their bodies a spectral map of former Yugoslavia. In their afterlife, photographs retain their ethical imperative to remember, extending it from survivors of traumatic displacement to the whole generation that lived through those times, irrespective of their proximity or distance to suffering.

Blank Photograph

Ugrešić’s (verbal) photo album, or “family museum,” as she entitles her second chapter, is framed by two pictures that traditionally would not qualify as familial memory repositories: an old picture of unknown origin (reproduced

on the cover of the American edition of the novel) and a reject. The first, a yellowed photograph from the turn of the century that represents three women bathing in the river Pakra (in Northern Croatia), has entered a circuit that I have termed the afterlife of pictures—an existence that derails its indexical function, transforming it in this case into a ritual prop: it “is like a lamp lit in a murky window, a heartening secret gesture with which I draw pictures out of the indifferent whiteness” (173). Naked bathing women have been a preferred topic of contemplation for the male painter’s gaze; the apparent spontaneity masked the studied pose and the constructed nature of femininity represented by this type of scene. Ugrešić’s unidentified picture enters a dialogue with this tradition. Smiling yet shying away and hiding their bodies under garments, the bathers’ nakedness (to the eye of the camera) is revealed by the reflective surface of the water: a breast transpires in the mirroring surface that cuts their bodies in two yet renders back more to their identities. The link that is being established through the private ritual of remembrance between these Slavic *baigneuses* and the narrator opens up a feminine space of memory that does not rely on the grand gestures immortalized by patriarchal History. Reproduced on the cover of the 1999 American edition of the novel, this photograph has become a trademark of the book and is bound to be the center of readers’ attention. Rather than focusing on it, I will concentrate on the less visible yet highly important “other” photograph that encloses Ugrešić’s family and ethnic group museum: the overexposed, blank reject.

This ekphrastic snapshot simultaneously embodies absolute blankness and absolute potentiality. The blank reject photograph licenses the unlimited field of memory as well as its slippages (errors, permutations, affective distortions, false connections):

I finger a worthless souvenir, the only photograph of all of us together. And there, from the left (was it the left?) should have been dark-eyed Nuša, then Doti with her broad face and piercing look, then Ivana with a smile that spread over her face like warm water, then Alma, the colour of copper, beside her the reliable and serious Dinka and I...Our empty photograph was taken several years ago at a dinner which I want to remember. It is also perfectly possible that it was never taken, it is possible that I have invented it all, that I am projecting on to the white expanse faces which do not exist and recording something which never occurred. For all I have in my hand is a blank, reject photograph.... (173)

This picture was supposed to document the last dinner enjoyed by the narrator and her friends—university professors like her—before the war distanced them from each other. In this paragraph as well as throughout the whole novel, Ugrešić emphasizes two aspects of memory preservation. The first is the fluidity of forms and substance of memory. They dissolve the boundaries that artificially demarcate disciplines—photography, writing, sculpture, art installations,

stamps and stamping, imprinting, recording, etching. “I am projecting...and recording” states the narrator about her strategy of imagining the past on the blank photograph. The blank film behaves like the white page of paper ready to be inscribed. The intertextual play between the various forms of inscription (each implicitly or explicitly referencing the others) and the interchangeability of methods ultimately emphasize a fluidity of memory that disregards attempts to stabilize and institutionalize it. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is an homage to the “arts” of memory—to its poetics and to its duplicity as well.

The second main feature of memory is its syncopated character. Despite the attempt of traditional institutions (national museums, publicly sanctified monuments) to create the illusion of a coherent, continuous, and teleological recovering of the past, collective and individual memory remains discontinuous. The most coherent photo album one could imagine cannot dissimulate the fragmentariness of its constituent pieces. Ugrešić’s novel enacts this discontinuity at the level of the text. Even when the verbal snapshots that succeed one another are articulated dialectically, or according to quasi-musical motifs, or based on patterns of repetition, the liberating character of this form of remembrance emerges from its caesuras, from the impossibility of fitting all the pieces together and therefore of arresting the meaning of the past. Her narrative strategy implicitly opposes the artificial coherence and continuity imposed by the new Serbian or Croat authorities on their respective national history. As she explains in *The Culture of Lies*:

Terror by remembering is a parallel process to terror by forgetting. Both processes have the function of building a new state, a new truth. Terror by remembering is a strategy by which the continuity (apparently interrupted) of national identity is established, terror by forgetting is the strategy whereby a ‘Yugoslav’ identity and any remote prospect of its being re-established is wiped out....Terror by remembering as a method of establishing a national identity does not shrink from national megalomania, heroisation, mythicisation, the absurd accepted lies, in other words. (80-81)

Ugrešić pays great attention to the pathologies of memory in such times of upheaval: amnesia, pseudomnesia, and hypermnesia. If former Eastern Bloc countries have erased many memories of their communist regimes, then the Yugoslav space stands out in the eagerness with which new mythologies and bodies of cultural memory have been shaped. And if Yugo-nostalgia, as a longing for stability and unity, does seep into the narrator’s perspective, the vision of a perfect past during Tito’s rule is never granted more authority than a myth.

A blank photograph—a technical error of the recording medium—is worthless from the perspective of its failed mimetic function. At the same time, it is invaluable because the erased medium was initially impressed with the memory of the women’s shapes; hence it represents the absolute potentiality

of a faded text. After all, the color white is the result of the combination of all the other colors in the spectrum. Though a photograph belonging to a private collection, this picture is an effigy of the transition time in Eastern European countries, of that liminal time that simultaneously marked the erasure of systems of inscribing (and prescribing) identities—the communist regimes—and the chaos of absolute potentiality that followed. For several years in Eastern Europe, this transition acted as does the blank photograph in Ugrešić's novel: a time of erasure and of the impossibility of imposing a stable meaning as well as a time of refashioning and reimagining the past. In the former Yugoslav lands, new mythologies and interpretations were entrenched or ousted with more eagerness than in other former communist countries. Once again, as with the Bosnian albums in the Berlin flea markets, the photographic medium marks the connection between the apparently separate private and public spheres of memory. This preference underscores a stronger ethical involvement than the novel reveals at a cursory reading.

The blank photograph simultaneously licenses memory and forbids it. It is predicated on “white noise”—the presence and absence of the voice of a subject.⁴ The “noisy” photograph, conspicuous in its void, mediates between the tranquil yet sordid years of the communist regime and the dynamism and acrimony of the years to come. “Inarticulate noise full of sound and fury” (*Museum* 194) swept over Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Old borders have been dissolved and new “firm borders” have not yet been established “between the existing and dreamed worlds” (195). This photograph straddles the difference between recollection and projection and unites them under the sign of imagination. Its origin is closely connected to the visit of Alfred, the angel, during “the last supper” of the “university girls.”

It is Alfred's visitation that opens up a field of metaphors and techniques of inscription. Traditionally, angels are figures of inspiration who mediate between the divine word and the human work of art, marking the impossibility of full authorship outside the realm of heavenly inspiration. The angelic intermediary, the winged messenger of God inscribes the divine word onto the mind of the artist, enabling the act of creation. It is within this process of mediation that the connection between feather (of angelic origin) and plume (the instrument of writing) is articulated. Before taking leave from “the university girls,” Alfred gives each of them, except for the narrator, a feather from his wings. Yet contrary to all expectations, the process of writing and creativity that is being anticipated does not take place, for Alfred's feathers erase the surface of their minds: the next day, none of the narrator's friends remembers Alfred's visit although one of them carries his presence inscribed on her body because she was impregnated during this visitation. Alfred's feathers, which were supposed to enable the process of inscription, erase the medium of memory. It is not only the minds of the participants that become blank, but the film also fails to record the divine presence. What is left is a blank(ed) photograph.

On the other hand, it is difficult to refrain from reading the presence of Alfred within the Benjaminian tradition of the Angelus Novus especially since Ugrešić fondly quotes the leftist thinker elsewhere. According to Benjamin, the angel of history has his eyes on the past while he is driven backwards into the future by the storm called progress. At his feet the debris of history accumulates (Benjamin 257-58). For Benjamin and for Ugrešić as well, past, present, and future are not discrete timeframes strung one after another on a teleological trajectory of progress: they interpenetrate and inform one another. Photographic experiments with superimposed shapes best define the relation between epochs, argues Svetlana Boym of Benjamin's understanding of temporal frames, implicitly validating Ugrešić's choice of the blank(ed) photograph (27). Also, the vignette is the *modus operandi* both in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* as both authors attempt to make sense of history without imposing a totalizing narrative.

Alfred is, to a certain extent, an angel of history since he mediates between past and future: he predicts the future by reading the Tarot cards, yet the future emerges as a jumbled quotation of the past: "Soon after Alfred's visit the surrounding reality would be transformed into chaos (a chaos of quotation, as it happens!), into an inarticulate noise full of sound and fury" (*Museum* 194). The blank(ed) photograph, full of the inarticulate noise of shapes blended in a palimpsest, is the iconic representation of the chaos of quotation characterizing the post-communist transitions. In Yugoslavia, this chaos came up more dramatically and sharply than in the other countries, yet all of Eastern Europe has been traversed by the debris of older quotations. To imagine Eastern Europe as a *tabula rasa* ready to be inscribed anew with different social, political, and cultural systems is a fantasy. The post-1989 apparently blank snapshots teem with the invisible chaos of previous dictums. The present does not turn a new page; it brings to the surface an already inscribed one in a perpetual recirculation of material. The present is an upside-down past, and yet the same past with a difference, as Alfred's predictions show:

Alfred produced words like a magician's silk handkerchiefs from a hat. He pronounced sentences in the rhythm of masters of black rap, interrupting them with sighs which seemed now like a monkey's grunts, now like a bird's chirrup, now like the click of a dolphin.... "[H]e that hath an ear, let him hear, ye-ye, for the false side will become the true, the true the false, uuu-huu, the left will become the right, and the right the left, ah-ha, for without are dogs, sorcerers, and whore-mongers, iii-hi, murderers and idolaters, ye-ye, and those that are above will soon come down, i-hiii, and those that are below will rise up, up-up, so, write the things which thou hast seen, ye-ye, for the truth will become a lie, and a lie will be the truth, heh-heh, and the great will be small, and the small will be huge, ah-ha, he that hath an ear let him hear, eh-he, for the ugly will become lovely, and the lovely ugly, uu-hu, and the dragons will sprout teeth, and the bones of the dead will rise, iii-hi, they will

rise up, up-up, and the spirits of your forefathers will come to claim their due, ah-ha, they picked the cherry tree, hee-hee, without inviting me, hee-hee, one has no fun at all, oh-ho, when one is very small, oh-ho....” (185-86)

The admixture of genres (from inspired prophecy to contemporary rap practices), the foreshadowing of a world *a l'envers*, the Bakhtinian carnivalization of everyday life norms, the disruption of hierarchies, and the loss of social contours—are all characteristic of the post-1990 transitions. For the former Yugoslavia in particular, the years following the collapse of the communist regime brought about social, political, and cultural chaos. Dramatic transformations of the political stage took place. They shifted political actors from left to right, recycled older slogans, and mechanically reversed previous dictums.

Alfred's injunction to make a record of the events is particularly interesting since it is he who undermines the possibility of remembering. “The feather as light as oblivion” (188), which he gives as a gift to each of the narrator's friends, erases the remembrance of the inspirational visit. What kind of testimony arises from this deficient memory? What will one record in writing if “a lie will be the truth” (185)? This incident appears as a statement on the clash between the flexible and resilient medium of memory and the rigorous moral injunctions of the testimonial genre. It also points to the clashing narratives and dueling quotations that mark the discourse field of early 1990s in the former Yugoslav states. The multiple sources from which quotations originate (from Christian sermon, to rap rhythms, and to Serbian children's poetry) legitimate as many different political statements. Yet, if his prediction starts as a classical and apparently apolitical moment of fortune-telling (even the form of the verb in the English translation is the archaic “hath”), it cannot overcome political implications: using a quote from the Serbian children's poet Zmaj in Zagreb, Alfred rouses the animosity of one of the narrator's friends. Ugrešić has a penchant for detonating the political charge of texts that disguise themselves as apolitical. In an Althusserian gesture, she reveals the regimentation of children's texts (including the primer) under the umbrella of ideological state apparatuses.

“The Primer” is a vignette that walks a tight line between reflective nostalgia and countermemory, to use Svetlana Boym's terms.⁵ It belies the Titoist happy vision of brotherhood between Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, Macedonians, and Montenegrins and the unquestioned belief in progress revealed by Tesla radios, tractors plowing the soil, steam engines “racing into a cloudless future” (75), which clutter the pages of the primer. The forward-going vector of socialist progress intersects with the past-oriented vector of nostalgia, another form of utopia that represents a yearning for the (allegedly) slower, peaceful rhythms of a cherished moment from the past (Boym xv). Ugrešić uses countermemory as a scanning tool that reveals the touched-up picture of innocent childhood,

yet she does not shy away from acknowledging her own Yugonostalgia: “The first page and the first four pictures moved me deeply” (*Museum* 74).⁶ It is this cocktail of “countermemory, carnival, kitsch and reflective nostalgia” that allowed a generation of Eastern European intellectuals at the end of the 1980s “to perform a cultural exorcism, to shake up historical myths revealing the mechanisms of seduction and mass hypnosis, the codependency of personal and official memory” (Boym 62), a task to which Ugrešić subscribes.

Far from being separated from one another, the past enables the future; the reading of the faded texts facilitates the writing of the new ones. This is the relationship that is being established between the two photographs that the narrator carries with her in exile. She uses these snapshots in her private ritual of remembrance: “I place another photograph alongside our blank one. The yellowed photograph from the beginning of the century is like a lamp lit in a murky window, a heartening secret gesture with which I draw pictures from the indifferent whiteness” (196). Celia Hawkesworth’s word choice in the English translation further emphasizes the interconnection between writing and reading the photographic material through the process of “drawing.” The older photograph of the three bathers inspires the act of drawing and inscribing meaning on the blank surface of the reject photograph. Simultaneously, it also allows the narrator to wrench and draw out meanings and images from the already inscribed but erased photographic medium. From this perspective, historical meaning both arises from documents directly and is imposed by those who scrutinize those documents. It is a reading-writing of the past. Besides, there is no such thing as historical objectivity; the subjectivity of the narrator of cultural memory or academic history inserts itself in the description of the past.

The present appears both as a time auspicious for new acts of writing and inscription, as the main social actors open up a “new page” of history, and as a moment when the faded writing emerges once again since the spirits of the forefathers have a claim in the shaping of the interpretation of events. Under the heat of the events, the invisible ink in which the claims of the forefathers are written will color and render visible a text that only appeared to have lost its legibility and power of legitimation. Literal and metaphorical “bones of contention,” the remnants of ancestors buried during the communist years of pseudo-union among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, have risen to the surface. Jonathan Goldberg, in an interpretation of Erasmus’s etiological fable of the origin of the alphabet, clarifies the association between dragon’s teeth, bones, and writing; this association appears in truncated form in Alfred’s prophecy. According to Erasmus, Cadmus sowed the teeth of a dead snake in the ground from which leapt two lines of armed men who destroyed each other. “The point of the fable is that the number of teeth in the mouth of the snake is equal to the number of letters that Cadmus brought to Greece” from the Phoenicians (Goldberg 177). In Ugrešić’s text, the bones of the ancestors

similarly sowed in the ground enable a new act of inscription (the post-1990 nationalist discourses that have plagued the former Yugoslav republics) as well as the destruction brought about by the ethnic wars.⁷ Ugrešić bitterly observes that “at this moment the Yugoslav peoples resemble demented gravediggers” (*Culture* 226). The ancestors’ bones and historical locations (Kosovo Polje for Serbs, the city of Knin for Croats) have inspired the modification of historical narratives in order to emphasize ethnic primacy and continuity over centuries.

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* the angelic foretelling of the future turns into a chaos of quotation, a recirculation of the material past, without the sense of a real forward movement towards a future goal. The author supplants the teleological view of history characteristic of communist historiography. In tune with Marxism-Leninism but sometimes distorting its doctrines into grotesque oversimplification, Soviet and Eastern Bloc historiography was predicated on an identification of class conflicts as far back as the medieval period, an artificial emphasis on revolutionary consciousness, and the outlining of a clear trajectory of historical development. With sufficient manipulation, no event could escape regimentation in this grandiose perspective. Yet simultaneously, a flagrant atemporality haunted communist speech, which avoided disclosure about insignificant or inexistent economic and social progress. This is the atemporal cycle that recirculates the same trite quotations throughout the centuries in Dubravka Ugrešić’s vision of the new states forged in the early 1990s. Yet Ugrešić still allows room for new acts of writing provided that they take place under the aegis of the intellectual figure. Her metaphors of drawing on/out the material of the past allow for the necessary break in the cycle of circuitous truisms and give agency to the writer.

Engendering Clio

What does a woman write about at a time of war? Should she attest to the suffering of her nation or to the condition of women during a war carried out mainly by men, when women’s bodies become surfaces on which the belligerent sides write cynical and violent letters to each other? War can cause usually non-disjunctive identity markers—gender and nationality—to become mutually exclusive. Dubravka Ugrešić along with four other well-known Croatian intellectuals (including Slavenka Drakulić and Rada Iveković) fell into the split between Croat identity and transnational feminist identification in December 1992. An anonymous article, published by the Croat nationalist newspaper *Globus*, called them “witches” and accused them of badmouthing their country at international human rights agencies as they protested the lack of freedom of speech in the press. Their alleged guilt sprang from inspiring a vote of no confidence from New York representatives of the PEN writers’ association for the Croatian branch to organize the following international meeting in Dubrovnik. Combining facts, allegations, and vitriolic slander,

the article's author declared the women's anti-war attitude unpatriotic and, by false implication, pro-Serbian.⁸ "Croatia's Feminists Rape Croatia" read the dramatic title of the article, which accused the five intellectuals of casting the war in terms of women's suffering instead of focusing exclusively on the rapes of Croat and Muslim women at the hands of Serbian men. In the hypermasculine atmosphere of the war, women's bodies and voices were thus hijacked for nationalist propaganda: the former were taken to be jarring indexes of national suffering and humiliation; the latter were enjoined to remain faithful to "patriotic" efforts.

The slippage from claims of lack of patriotism to ethnic typecasting was easy, as "blood type" nationalism was sweeping the ex-Yugoslav countries in the early 1990s, and officials were checking the genetic and ideological credentials of each citizen. Ugrešić's uncomfortable relation with the nationalist Croat state, which was suspicious of all citizens with a mixed ethnic background (her mother is Bulgarian), translated into a rejection of ethnic membership. Asked point-blank by a journalist "What are you technically?" she retorted with a geographical affiliation: "a Balkan" (Kuhlman 957). This refusal is pushed one step further in the glossary appended to *Culture of Lies*, in which she embraces an ontological state of uprootedness and hybrid ethnic identity:

My passport has not made me a Croat. On the contrary, I am far less that today than I was before. I am no one. And everyone. In Croatia I shall be a Serb, in Serbia a Croat, in Bulgaria a Turk, in Turkey a Greek, in Greece a Macedonian, in Macedonia a Bulgarian....Being an ethnic "bastard" or "schizophrenic" is my natural choice, I even consider it a sign of mental and moral health. (269-70)

Yet, as Martha Kuhlman points out, Ugrešić's rejection of ethnic categories, as well as of affiliation to Eastern European or Central European literature, is also a rebellion against the (Western) stereotype that writers from the former Second World must write political fiction (957). However, if immediately after her departure from Croatia Ugrešić naively (as she implies) clung to what she thought to be her only homeland—Bibliopolis—her next published works departed from fiction to engage with the essay genre; even the format of her succeeding novels was affected by the themes of war, exile, and fragmented memories.

At home and abroad Ugrešić was faced with two assumptions about the ex-Yugoslav writer's preferred style and intended mission: that the identity of the writer is tied up with the war in her country and that the moral duty of intellectuals is to speak up in the name of a collective "we." It is against these assumptions that Ugrešić spoke repeatedly in interviews, at conferences, and in her essays. She observed that those who wrote about the war and suffering made center stage; those who took their books and love of "belles lettres" as their only passports found themselves marginalized on the Western book

market (“Baggage” 37). She rejected the collective “we” as a continuation of the communist mentality. What she was left with is an assertion of personal truth, toned down with self-irony and playfulness. It is within this paradigm that she engenders and personalizes Clio, the muse of history.

In an article summarizing the trends and tendencies in memory and history studies, Paula Hamilton justly remarks that, with a few notable exceptions, “all the major work that examines memory in relation to various national identities and pasts is by male historians who have not been especially concerned with the gendering of memory, only with national non-sexed subjects” (17-18). Albeit from the realm of literature rather than scholarly work, Ugrešić’s novel comes to heal this disturbing absence. It also obliquely engages an ironic dimension of the absence of gendered memory work. For centuries authoritative historiography has been done by men while women were relegated to the task of cultural memory transmission; those detailed customs and sagas of the group/family belonged with kitchen tales while the scholarly work of history was the playground of men. Ugrešić’s fascination with kitchen tales was explored with much verve in a feminist and postmodern vein in her earlier work *In the Jaws of Life*.

Female activities and the female body as repositories of valuable cultural information and as important ingredients in the narratives handed down through generations are energetically foregrounded in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Women’s cooking has earned a classic role in literature, with a high point in South American magical realism. This tradition has transformed an apparently insignificant, uncreative activity into a history-changing, emotion-unlocking topos. And there is indeed a lot of cooking going on in the novel: the narrator goes into periodic baking frenzies, her grandma used to greet her guests with mountain-high trays of cookies, and the narrator’s university colleagues arrange sumptuous feasts. Yet, as in the trend-setting *Like Water for Chocolate* or in Proust’s classical madeleine scene, food is not just ingested nutrient. Food fosters or blocks the flow of memory: the visitation of Alfred the angel takes place during one of the university girls’ feasts over cheese soufflé, chicken baked in orange sauce, and pastry baskets filled with chocolate cream (*Museum* 174-75).

A recipe for caraway soup, dismissively categorized by the narrator’s mother as pauper’s food, is pasted in the middle of a page for scrutiny as a museum exhibit rendered exotic by the temporal distance from World War II shortages. This attention to minute details of a mostly feminine daily existence (mother’s recipes, the Duchess’s sewing and the multicolored patches she handed out to little girls for the wardrobe of their dolls, Auntie Puppa’s lessons in elegant walking) crosses paths with the similar focus of historians of mentalities and microhistorians. This becomes one of the watermarks of gendered memory work that we can trace in the novel. The interest in the minutiae of a female existence finds a precursor in the work of the two French schools. Ugrešić

herself stresses that the streets of Berlin, the disorder of Teufelberg, and the chaos of the city's flea-markets enact "museums of everyday life" (*Museum* 229). The restitution of women's position in the panorama of a past age, with their activities, concerns, fashions, and mores, can be achieved in the pages of literature with the same success as in the history of mentalities.

With a gendered approach and a postmodern distrust of official history, Dubravka Ugrešić explores the forms and conditions of possibility of remembrance during a time of war. The metaphors she draws upon represent historical truth and memory systems as a combination of techniques of retrieval and inscription, a reading-writing of the past.⁹ Both the afterlife of family albums and the peculiar function of the reject picture highlight Ugrešić's special use of the photographic medium in relation to private and public memory. If Ugrešić's novel is what Barthes has called a writerly text—its reading presupposes an active engagement similar to the act of writing and thus prevents it from going stale—it also justifies an understanding of memory that straddles the dichotomy between unearthing (reading the past) and constructing (writing/authorizing the past). The memory system that emerges from her text sits between practices of reading and writing: it is simultaneously based on something already there that needs to be deciphered, and it is based on the active process of shaping, re-modeling, and writing it anew. Playing with verbal photographs as flexible testimonials, Ugrešić casts her novel into a fragmented form not to celebrate postmodern disenchantment with truth but to counter nationalist reification of memory.

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NOTES

¹ There are obvious correspondences between the narrator's background and the author's life. However, Ugrešić is adamant in her refusal to allow the readers to identify her with her character (*Museum* xi).

² Scholars vary in their opinion about how much change the collapse of the communist regimes brought to the discipline of history. On the one hand, the end of the communist regimes opened up the interest for "the narrative turn" (120-21) and the relations between the discipline of history and postmodern cultural trends as Jerzy Topolski indicates. On the other hand, Maria Todorova sees (rather prematurely in 1992) no visible change other than an awareness of the new and fashionable concepts despite a continued traditional attitude in research work.

³ The Museum of Unconditional Surrender is an actual institution, built by the USSR in East Berlin to commemorate the German capitulation on May 9, 1945.

⁴ As white contains all the colors (wave lengths) of the visible spectrum in equal quantities, so "white noise" contains all the frequencies in a given range in (almost) equal quantities. The movement between color and sound in my argument is intentional since, as I have already pointed out, the various recording media of memory are interchangeable.

⁵ For Boym, restorative nostalgia is an essentialist desire to stay true to past forms and to reconstruct the lost home; reflective nostalgia is self-reflexive and acknowledges uprootedness, the impermanence of home, and the fragmented nature of the past. This is the type of

nostalgia embraced by the narrator of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Boym defines countermemory as “an alternative way of reading by using ambiguity, irony, doublespeak, [and] private intonation that challenged the official bureaucratic and political discourse” in the Eastern Bloc (62).

⁶ Yugonostalgia is a local form of what the Germans call *Ostalgie*, and that was depicted in the film *Good-bye, Lenin*. Ugrešić acknowledges the hold Yugonostalgia has on her (and on her characters), as she fondly remembers the years of apparent unity during Tito’s regime, yet she equally recognizes its unreality.

⁷ The role of ancestral bones in Serbian national myths is on display in the dispute over the significance of Kosovo Polje (The Field of the Blackbirds), the site of the 1389 battle between the armies gathered under the leadership of the Serbian King Lazarus and the Turkish forces. King Lazarus was captured and killed by his enemies, but his bones were buried at Gracanica Monastery in Kosovo and have been the object of pilgrimage of devout Serbs for the last six hundred years. For more information on the ethnic wars and nationalism see Banac, Ramet, and Fine.

⁸ Tax offers more context with her casebook of translated and summarized articles from the Croatian press. See also Lukić.

⁹ Her solution is also outstanding in view of acerbic debates between the proponents of an older (modernist) vision of historical truth and its poststructuralist critics. We can see her aligned with a combined and complicated solution embraced by historians like Topolski (who argues in favor of “coconstruction” of historical events) or Trouillot. The latter observes that “between the mechanically ‘realist’ and naively ‘constructivist’ extremes, there is the more serious task of determining not what history is...but how history works” (25).

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