

Slouching Towards Karaoke

The Writing in Public Book Review

Richard Byrne reviews Dubravka Ugrešić's *Karaoke Culture*.

Open Letter Books (translated with an afterword by David Williams)

When I interviewed Dubravka Ugrešić in 2010 for *The Common Review*, I asked her what had changed in the decade since she'd published the 2003 essay collection *Thanks for Not Reading*—her sharp, witty dissection of the literary scene in Western Europe and the Balkans. Ugrešić fastened on the levity that she was able to muster for the essays in that book - and its subsequent evaporation. "Today," she told me, "things are not funny anymore. Writers, authors, intellectuals—all are endangered species, and the cultural sphere that was built and developed during the Gutenberg epoch is disappearing. We have entered a new epoch: a digital one. We find ourselves in a new cultural environment, and its basic premises are high-tech barbarism, the democratic participation of literally everybody, and the erasure of institutions such as the author, tradition, competence, and a hierarchy of knowledge. Now I sound like Sam, the American eagle from *The Muppet Show*, but surprisingly, I don't care anymore."

A new collection of Ugrešić essays, *Karaoke Culture*, is an excellent yardstick of the dim view that its author takes of the last decade in literary culture. And, yes, the book does have moments where Ugrešić sounds like the Muppets' basso profundo killjoy - with a healthy dose of The Grumbler from Austrian author Karl Kraus' epic play *The Last Days of Mankind* thrown in for good measure.

Throughout this new collection, Ugrešić is alarmed by the way in which the egalitarian and disposable aesthetic embodied in such phenomena as karaoke, blogging, fan fiction or the Flickr gallery has washed away the authority, the timelessness and the exquisite pleasures of high art. Culture's been transformed into an ego trip, she complains, and an evanescent one at that.

In the book's opening essay, "Why Karaoke, and What's Culture Got to Do With It?," Ugrešić observes, "[t]he content is new, and it's changing from one second to the next, so what we try and articulate today can disappear tomorrow, leaving no trace of its existence. We live in a liquid epoch."

The ubiquity and pervasiveness of a culture fed on ABBA and IKEA offers an immense bull's eye that an essayist much less skilled than Ugrešić could easily obliterate. And yet that culture - as she readily admits in the final reflection of a series of essays devoted to "karaoke culture" - survives and even thrives on the pricks of arrows in a literary critic's quiver:

This is our glorious age, our age of karaoke; we embrace it, sink down into it like quicksand. There's no cause for alarm, we won't drown, but we won't swim our way out either. We will remain, we will survive. Survival is, in any case, our only purpose on this earth. Sure, we will survive.

This is acidic writing, and Ugrešić's essays in *Karaoke Culture* etch themselves on the imagination even more sharply when she wrestles with the karaoke and kitsch of Balkan culture. In locating particulars unfamiliar to most Western readers in her geography of cultural desolation (the thousands of gifts of handmade crafts given by Yugoslavia's citizens to Josip Broz Tito, for instance, or the filmmaker Emir Kusturica's creation of a bizarre faux folk arts village called

Drvengard in south Serbia), Ugrešić actually strengthens her case for the ubiquitous flood of crap culture that we cannot escape.

“Kusturica is a capricious ruler,” she observes in an essay on the famed director’s village of the arts. “Drvengrad has a prison, a little joke to amuse visitors I guess. The time I visited a painting of George W. Bush’s head hung behind the metal bars on the prison’s wooden doors. A glance at Bush’s head prompted a fleeting smile, and then an immediate feeling of unease. It occurred to me that, depending on Kusturica’s mood, anyone could (and can) end up there.” This is Ugrešić at her best: a witness and a clarion who calls out the voices of violence, hypocrisy and sham patriotism in Central and Southeast Europe.

Yet even those who have followed the twists and turns of Ugrešić’s career may not be completely familiar with the full story of her exile from Croatia at the beginning of the wars that engulfed the former Yugoslavia two decades ago. In researching an earlier essay of her work, I had to take considerable time poking around in sources in multiple languages to rough out the details. For that reason alone, one of the highlights of *Karaoke Culture* is “A Question of Perspective” - Ugrešić’s first extended essay about the personal attacks in the Croatian media that led her into exile. “A Question of Perspective” is a tour de force sparked into life by a chance newspaper clipping. But it also serves as a magnet that pulls together many of the thematic strands in her writing: the seduction of nationalism for so-called “intellectuals” of the region, the sexism and violence woven inextricably into the language of patriotism, and the hysteria of the witch hunt against those who stood for peace against war.

I chose the phrase “led her into exile” above very carefully because

Ugrešić herself positions her departure from Croatia with great nuance. Attacks upon her and other women authors as “witches” in the Croatian media ultimately led to direct provocations upon her. “[P]ragmatic, powerful and efficient,” she writes with characteristic fire, “the machinery of hate picked me up and launched my broom on a powerful tailwind. And I flew.”

Yet, in the final analysis, from the viewpoint of that flight, she concludes that perhaps it was a willing flight into exile from the sickening sycophancy and brutality of nationalism that saturated that era:

So, my fellow tribesmen, let's give it one more try, loud and clear this time: Yes, I left willingly. No, you didn't chase me away, I abandoned you. No, you didn't part company with me, I did with you. You didn't disqualify me, you disqualified yourselves. You didn't fire me, I fired you, yes, you.

While *Karaoke Culture*'s finest moments come when Ugrešić is on her embattled, native ground, these essays, as her other work, return to large landscapes of time, gender and money that she explored in her earliest writings. In her last novel, a meditation on aging, femininity and folklore titled *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, Ugrešić proved that her insights on culture and politics far from the Balkans were equally deft and profound.

Indeed, one of the themes that Ugrešić tackles these days is the effects of economic inequalities on our moral psychology. In an essay titled “Assault on the Minibar,” for instance, Ugrešić reflects on this seemingly simple luxury, interrogating it as a symbol of convenience and class: “The minibar is an expensive escapade, just like a psychoanalytic séance. The minibar perpetuates the same psychoanalytic model. Hence the receptionist's authoritarian tone,

hence the sniffing around your room and inspection (of your minibar!) in your absence, hence your righteous rage at this mind-numbing display of power.”

In a number of the essays in *Karaoke Culture* (and a lengthy essay called “My Own Little Mission” just published in the recently-revived magazine *The Baffler*), Ugrešić is beginning to link her hard-won wisdom on gender, culture and conflict to the economic battles looming in Europe and the United States.

In that way, *Karaoke Culture* is both a summing up (and settling of scores) of one phase of Ugrešić’s career. It is also a preview of where the writer may take her readers over the next decade in her fiction and her essays.

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