



The ‘Other Spaces’ of Exile in Dubravka Ugrešić’s *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*

Katalin SÁNDOR

Babeş–Bolyai University
Department of Hungarian and General Linguistics
sandorkati17@gmail.com

Abstract. My essay investigates the way heterotopic spatial and cultural experiences shape the concepts of space and the spatial practices of exile, as well as their narrative representation in Dubravka Ugrešić’s novel, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Following Foucault’s approach, heterotopic spatial experiences can be described by the localizability and, at the same time, the in-betweenness and the placelessness of space, by its relational aspect and by the capacity of heterotopias to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces that are in themselves incompatible. In Ugrešić’s novel the museum, the zoo, the flea-market can be identified as heterotopic spaces which are not ontologically given, but are constituted by spatial, discursive and corporeal practices. This essay examines how the subject experiences not only the otherness of the Other, but also her/his own disquieting ambivalence in the discontinuous spaces and heterotopias of exile. The paper also reflects on the question whether the text functions as an act of critical re-mapping with both aesthetic and ethical consequences.

Keywords: Dubravka Ugrešić, space representation, heterotopia, spatial practices

“Wo bin Ich?” – this untranslated question is the title of the last chapter of Dubravka Ugrešić’s novel, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*.¹ Along this question the text can be read as a narrative about a self-exiled narrator’s nomadic steps, a first-person account of a Croatian woman writer, whose routes expose a

¹ The novel was written during the author’s self-imposed exile.

peculiar cultural cartography before and after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The fragmented aspect and the rhetorical heterogeneity of the text can be interpreted as an attempt “to counter nationalist reification of memory” (Popescu, qtd. in Wienhold-Brokish 2010, 354) or to elude a totalizing narrative about the past, but also as a symptom of the unspeakability of trauma and displacement. By writing the nomadic steps of a self-imposed exile, the narrative becomes especially sensitive to the problem of space and reflects on spatial practices that are inseparable from questions of identity construction, of cultural otherness and cultural nomadism, of textual remembrance and amnesia.

If – relying on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological views – we consider space not some kind of ether in which things “bathe,” but a medium that enables the location of things (qtd. in Figal 2009, 140), and if we relate spatial relations to a subject who is able to locate herself/himself in space, then space is no longer conceived as a withdrawing background, but as a constitutive part of cognitive processes and cultural, social practices. Moreover, temporality and spatiality are not only a set of empirical, physical relations; each of them “comes to life as a social construct which shapes empirical reality and is simultaneously shaped by it. Thus, the spatial order of human existence arises from the (social) production of space, the construction of human geographies that both reflect and configure being in the world” (Soja 1999, 123). Being socially and discursively constituted, space is also irreducibly heterogeneous, being inhabited by different values, ideologies, narratives, symbols, beliefs, phantasms, cultural maps and “other spaces” (or heterotopias, as Foucault would put it).

In Ugrešić’s novel the narrator’s continuous dislocations map out heterogeneous and intermediary spaces. These can be thematized within the framework of a cultural heterotopology that makes visible not only the heterotopic spaces in the text, but also their cultural embeddedness and the spatial practices that constitute them. The heterotopic spatial experience is shaped by the localizability and at the same time the in-betweenness and the placelessness of space, by its relational aspect and by the fact that “[t]he heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986, 25). Heterotopias such as the cemetery, the theatre, the garden, the museum, the library, the fairground, the vacation village, the prison, the brothel, the colony, the ship, etc., “always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (Foucault 1986, 26).

In the novel the museum, the zoo, the flea-market can be identified as heterotopic spaces which are not ontologically given, but constituted by spatial, discursive and corporeal practices. The discursive production and delimitation of not only heterotopias, but space in general, is also thematized in a short chapter of the novel entitled *Borders*. Here the railway line functions as a border for the child, because – according to local stories – beyond the line “concealed by the blue silk

of distance, lived Gypsies *who stole little children* [...] I imagined them drawing that silk in, covering me with it as with a scarf and I would vanish for ever” (Ugrešić 1999, 74). In the tactile-visual figure of the “blue silk of distance” spatial experience and the narrative which produces and dissects this space fold into each other, as if showing that physical space becomes palpable and at the same elusive through a discursive material, through the “silk” of figuration. The local narrative about the Gypsies who steal little children does not simply begin beyond the border, but draws the border itself and projects the space of the unknown, of the foreigner, of the Other beyond it. Thus, borders function as discursively produced dividing, controlling strategies that distribute a heterogeneous space according to political, social, cultural, national criteria, making the space forbidden, stigmatized, or cultic, familiar, and so on.

The conceptualization of space in Ugrešić’s novel is emphatically shaped by exile, emigration and displacement, in which the subject repeatedly performs acts of border crossing. In the discontinuous spaces of exile the subject experiences not only the undomesticable otherness of the Other, but also her/his own disquieting difference and ambivalence. Dislocation and border crossing become constitutive acts in the process of (re)making the self.

In Berlin or New York the narrator’s use of space becomes visible in practices which escape the filtering and regulating practice of panoptic administration and city planning, as de Certeau would put it. For de Certeau the everyday spatial practices, the “pedestrian movements form one of these ‘real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city’” (1999, 131). He understands these pedestrian movements – the “chorus of idle footsteps” – as “multiform, resistant, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised” (de Certeau 1999, 131). The regulating panoptic administration, as well as the readability of the city implies distance (an Icarian view), whereas the pedestrian movements imply proximity and the lack of the perspective of an all-seeing power. De Certeau uses the expressions “*tactile* apprehension” (1999, 131 – emphasis mine, K. S.) and “*kinesthetic* appropriation” (1999, 131) to describe the qualitative character, the style of the walking steps that “weave places together” (1999, 131). I consider it is worth laying more emphasis on the words *tactile* and *kinesthetic*: it seems that the regulating panoptical administration differs from the practice of walking also from the perspective of corporeality, of embodiedness: the former presupposes an almost disembodied experience of looking and apprehension, whereas the latter is an utterly embodied, sensual practice in which urban space is approached both as readable meaning and as something unreadable, sensual and diffuse. In Ugrešić’s novel the layers of history are read also by the walker’s feet. The topography of memory and that of the urban space fold into each other, walking in the city means touching a stratified, spatialized past: “... the walker could step on someone’s roof. The asphalt is only a thin crust covering human bones. Yellow stars, black swastikas, red

hammers and sickles crunch like cockroaches under the walker's feet" (Ugrešić 1999, 161).

Ugrešić's narrator relates the experience of in-betweenness and heterogeneity to the space of Berlin, which is called a mutant, transvestite (1999, 104), schizophrenic (1999, 231), museal city, an "archeological find," "a before-after place" (1999, 221). The city is not only a cluster of different spaces, but also a cluster of different times; linear, historical or measurable time often seems to be disturbed or suspended: "Altogether, there's something wrong with time here. In Berlin buses one can see the oldest old ladies in the world. It's as though they had forgotten to die" (Ugrešić 1999, 106). Berlin, a multi-layered collage of East and West, of different histories and ideologies, is written as a heterotopic space in which the performability of identity is linked to the use of space and to orientation practices. To buy Croatian newspapers the narrator chooses a route which cannot be explained by a rationalizing urbanistic discourse: she walks across a place filled with porn shops and "stalls run by Turks selling cheap food, exchange bureaux, jewellers and newspaper stands" (Ugrešić 1999, 101). She drags herself through "this warm tunnel greased with its various exhalations" and wrapped by a "strong smell of mutton fat" (Ugrešić 1999, 101). The way leading to Croatian newspapers overwrites urbanistic rationality and follows the diffuse, warm, bodiless and still palpable map of smell which functions for the narrator as a detour and as a medium both in a cultural and in a sensual, corporeal sense. The familiar smell of mutton fat related to the Eastern Turkish culture leads to the smell of printer's ink, the smell of home, which – in this case – orients through its absence.

The experience of placelessness and displacement is articulated by using and inhabiting heterotopic places. Such a place could be the zoo which, according to Foucault, is a heterotopia resembling the garden: it "is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (1986, 25). The garden is "the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world," "a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia" (Foucault 1986, 26).

In the European cultural history of the zoo as an institution (from the nineteenth century on) this garden has been shaped by the (orientalist) ideologies and the colonizing gaze of Western culture, but also by scientific ideologies or by the history of leisure time activities. The zoo offers the spectacle of the Other, of the wild which is domesticated, made controllable, exoticized and consumed from a safe and (power-related) position. Still, this garden aiming to become encyclopedic, maintains some disquieting contradictions; the zoo is a heterogeneous collage of the natural and the cultural in which – despite all harmonizing efforts – the traces of assembling and re-contextualization are visible: "lions direct their roars towards the Grundkredit bank, trains and cars pass alongside rhinoceros" (1999, 102). In this intermediary space the narrator notices remarkably many visitors who are in one way or another outsiders, displaced or misplaced within the social sphere: "Here, in the Berlin zoo, a

harmony is achieved between people and rhinos, drunks and monkeys, drug-sellers and wild goats, smugglers and lions, courting couples and seals, prostitutes and crocodiles..." (Ugrešić 1999, 102).

The novel begins by presenting a strange display in the zoo which could be a critical (meta)figure of this heterotopic space and of the ambiguous relation between the natural and the cultural. The unusual collection shows the content of the stomach of a walrus that died in the Berlin zoo: a cigarette lighter, a metal brooch, a hair grip, a water pistol, sunglasses, a metal comb, a beer can, a baby's shoe, etc. Through these objects the city penetrates into the body of the natural and the display subverts any clear delimitation between nature and culture. Not only the natural ingests the urban, but also the urban space swallows up the collage of the living which can be grasped only through its cultural-discursive remake. The stomach of the walrus and Teufelsberg, the zoo, the museums, the flea-markets become meta-figures in the text reflecting on each other and on the material and discursive depositories of history which in Ugrešić's text escape any reductive ideological appropriation.

Related to the theme of the zoo, a nomadic text fragment returns twice in the novel: the short text describes the way the narrator and the largest parrot of the world, the *Anodorhynchus hyazinthicus*, look at each other in the artificial light of the Vogelhaus. The two fragments narrating the same scene displace the narratorial point of view. This might be interpreted as a strategy that foregrounds the mediated and perspective-bound aspect of narration. In the first fragment we read about a third person's (a middle-aged woman's) gaze: "The woman and the splendid bird the colour of bluebells look at each other silently. [...] The woman is calmly chewing bread: with her fingers bent into pincers she breaks off quite small pieces and puts them in her mouth. The blue ara watches the woman with charming attention" (Ugrešić 1999, 105). In the second fragment the gaze will be that of the narrator. The displacement of the gazes implies or is the effect of a split, a distance necessary for reflecting on the self as Other. However, this apparently simple scene is shaped by multiple displacements: the heterotopia of the zoo is not only the observed space; the visitor is not the exclusive owner of the gaze. In the heterotopia of the zoo that exoticizes otherness, the observer abandons the appropriating gaze by observing that she herself is observed in the reciprocity of gazes. Thus, the heterotopia becomes a site for both reflection and self-reflection and for a subtle, hardly noticeable act of (dis)identification: the narrator resonates with the exhibited but still inaccessible otherness through her body. Her fingers resembling pincers continue in the beak and in the movements of the blue ara.

In Ugrešić's novel the walker's steps and the spatial practices that remake the city seem to be related to what de Certeau calls "'another spatiality' (an 'anthropological,' poetic and mythic experience of space), and to an *opaque and blind* mobility characteristic of the bustling city" (1999, 128). Thus "a *migrational*,

or metaphorical city” folds into “the clear text of the planned and readable city” (de Certeau 1999, 128). The flea-market, which is mentioned in the novel several times, could be a heterotopia of the migrational city. For Foucault, fairgrounds (and consequently flea-markets), “these marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities” are heterotopic places which – unlike temporal heterotopias linked to the accumulation of time (e.g., museums) – are not “oriented toward the eternal” and are “linked to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival” (1986, 26).

In the novel the Berlin flea-markets become the lived spaces of interculturality, of identification and remembrance practices. The Bosnian Kašmir's mother, for instance, crochets little mats only to pretend to sell them, but actually she goes to the flea-market to meet their folk. It is not surprising that the policemen who punish her for selling the mats without a licence do not understand her completely non-commercial reasons. But “[s]he's at it again... crocheting...” says Kašmir” (Ugrešić 1999, 226).

The flea-market is a nomadic, transitory heterotopia, which gathers not only cultural differences, but also the fragments and quotations of historical time: family albums, peaceful, reconciled military uniforms, watches, broken flower vases, etc. This transient space, the “rubbish heap of time” (Ugrešić 1999, 229), the transit zone of cultures and histories, permeates and disturbs the regulating urbanistic discourse by drawing an invisible map whose existence is linked solely to cultural practices of re-appropriating the space. For the refugees who live in *heims*, the street and the flea-market are spaces in which they can perform and redefine their cultural, social, ethnic and linguistic identity – by drawing the map of absence: “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. The map glimmers briefly and then disappears like a soap bubble” (Ugrešić 1999, 230).

If the flea-market is the heterotopia of transience, then the museum is the heterotopia of accumulated time. The Museum of Unconditional Surrender,² which lends its name to the novel, is evoked in the text several times. For Foucault, the museum is a space which collects time and creates a heterochrony, another time. Relating to nineteenth-century modernism, museums are general archives that accumulate “all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes” in a place “that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages” (Foucault 1986, 26).

In the novel the Museum of Unconditional Surrender (a war museum owned by the Soviet Union) becomes after the fall of the Berlin Wall the space of amnesia, the space of a cultural and memorial surrender. The smell of the museum

² The museum was closed in 1994, but reconceptualized and reopened as the German–Russian Museum in 1995.

is “heavy, stale, sweetish” (Ugrešić 1999, 224). In the emptiness of the museal space undisturbed by visitors the past is literally hibernating, it is unaddressed and unaddressable, closing onto itself. Just like the old woman in the museum who is sleeping and “hugging her own stomach like a cushion” (Ugrešić 1999, 222), as if suspended between the unstable status of the exposed object and the caretaker.

This heterotopic place is discovered by the narrator’s countrymen, by those whose relation to spaces and lands has been redefined by the experience of exile and emigration. For the ex-Yugoslav refugees who live in (consistently untranslated) *heims*, the café in the basement of the Museum of Unconditional Surrender becomes a somewhat familiar, culturally inhabitable space, not only due to a shared cultural memory and a still fresh experience of the communist past, but also due to a taste, to a corporeal, sensual familiarity: the Georgian coffee resembles “their” Turkish coffee. For the placeless the café inserted in-between memory and amnesia is paradoxically homely also because of its cultural placelessness, its historical nowhere. The refugees and the emigrants are slowly musealized not only because they re-appropriate the café of a museum or because their otherness is repeatedly put on display. They become “walking museum exhibits” (Ugrešić 1999, 234), because in the absence of institutionalized collective memory they do the work of remembrance and carry the lost culture of everyday objects and practices: Plavi Radion, the first Yugoslav washing powder, Studio Uno, the first television programme, Gavrilović meat pâté. Ugrešić’s cultural project of collecting and archiving extends beyond this novel: the lexicon of Yugoslavian mythology (www.leksikon-yu-mitologije.net) she and others propose is an on-line virtual museum collecting the “warmest” places (Ugrešić 2005) of collective memory (jokes, objects, newspapers, TV-series, posters, photographs), counterbalancing the lack of institutionalized frameworks.

In the novel the back side of musealizing practices is Teufelsberg, the artificial Berlin hill containing the ruins of the Second World War. The hill incorporating the historical debris of the city belongs to the geography of an impossible amnesia. It swallows up historical time and makes the remains of a historical epoch invisible by “naturalizing” them, covering them with vegetation. Teufelsberg redraws the geography of the city, the urban landscape by which it is reincorporated into history. The body of the city and the strata of time continue under the asphalt and under the grass of the artificial hill. Teufelsberg becomes the figure of another unwritten or unspeakable past leaking through the written, musealized discourse of history: “‘Berlin is Teufelsberg’ I say, madness covered with indifferent grass” (Ugrešić 1999, 168).

Ugrešić’s textual musealization appears as a practice of remembrance, as a way of (re)making the past. Writing about geocultural narratives and musealizing modalities, Kornélia Faragó remarks that after the disintegration of Yugoslavia only the narrative act, the textual organization and the anthropological gesture of

reconstruction through writing have a structure-forming capacity (2009, 7). Culturally significant objects, as well as immaterial artefacts and gestures of cultural collecting may acquire the function of structuring the text (Faragó 2009, 17). In the novel shaped by the practice of cultural collecting, the textual museum does not resemble the discourse of the normative, regulative museum. Ugrešić's collection is much closer to Hooper-Greenhill's *post-museum*, which – beyond the accumulation of objects – stimulates interpretation and the social use of the museal space (Hooper-Greenhill, qtd. in György 2005, 4). In the musealizing discourse of the novel (resembling the non-hierarchical texture of collage) the fragments of ex-Yugoslavian and European geo-cultural spaces are exhibited in a way that encourages intervention and rearrangement.

Ugrešić's collection and heterotopography (including the museum, the flea-market, the zoo) are part of a discourse in which identity, cultural otherness or the recent past of (ex-)Yugoslavia are not reified by unequivocal or adjudicating narratives. The text seems to follow “the chorus of idle footsteps” (de Certeau 1999, 131), and disturbs the maps of ideological closure. Thematizing the performative, ambivalent and nomadic aspect of identity and relating it to the heterotopic experience of exile, the text itself becomes fragmented, migrational, unstable, facing the unspeakability of displacement. In this way the novel can function as an act of critical remapping with both aesthetic and ethical consequences.

Works cited

- De Certeau, Michel. 1999. Walking in the City. In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, 126-133. London – New York: Routledge.
- Faragó Kornélia. 2009. A geokulturális elbeszélés változatai. Muzealizálási eljárások – posztmonarchikus beszédminták. [Variants of Geocultural Narratives. Procedures of Musealization.] In *A viszonyosság alakzatai. Komparatív poétikák, viszonylati jelentéskörök.* [Figures of Correlation. Comparative Poetics, Relational Circles of Meaning.], 7-22. Újvidék: Forum.
- Figal, Günther. 2009. *Tárgyiság. A hermeneutikai és a filozófia.* [Objectivity. The Hermeneutical and Philosophy.] Budapest: Kijárat.
- Foucault, Michel. 1986. Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics* vol. 16. no. 1. (Spring): 22-27.
- György Péter. 2005. Minden archívum, minden örökség. [Everything Is Archive, Everything Is Heritage.] *Iskolakultúra* no. 3: 4-15.
- Soja, Edward. 1999. History: Geography: Modernity. In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, 113-125. London – New York: Routledge.
- Ugrešić, Dubravka. 1999. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender.* Trans. Celia Hawkesworth. New York: A New Direction Book.

- . 2005. A jugó mitológia lexikona. (A nosztalgia az agy szubverzív tevékenysége) [The Lexicon of Yugo Mythology. (Nostalgia Is the Subversive Activity of the Brain)] *Lettre* no. 58. <http://www.c3.hu/scripta/lettre/lettre58/ugresic.htm> (3 September 2012)
- Wienhold-Brokish, Jessica Lynn. 2010. *"The Double Bind" of 1989: Reinterpreting Space, Place and Identity in Postcommunist Women's Literature*. Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.