

Tomislav Longinovic, *Karaoke Culture*. Slavic & East European Journal; Fall 2013, Vol. 57 Issue 3, p493.

Dubravka Ugresic. *Karaoke Culture*. Trans. David Williams. Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2011. 324 pp. \$15.95 (paper).

This collection of essays bears all the trademarks of the critical style Dubavka Ugresic has been cultivating for decades now in her prose and above all in her non-fiction analyses of both the local Balkan cultural conundrums and the encroaching global cultural homogenization of the planet. In the manner of dissident intellectuals from East-Central Europe of the past century, her writing exudes irony bordering on scathing sarcasm when grappling with issues confronting our increasingly post-human age. *Karaoke Culture* is a monument to the decline of values characteristic of humanism, a fleeting and biodegradable memorial to the author's own tragicomic fiascos when attempting to come to terms with the obtuse species she cannot help but belong to. The interminable conformism and lack of insight into the apocalyptic age the human race seems to be so mindlessly rushing into is the general atmosphere permeating this somewhat haphazardly edited book.

Besides the eponymous 100-page essay devoted to the rise of the Internet, the collection consists mainly of newspaper and magazine columns written over the past decade, with some reminiscences of that long-forgotten traumatic event that has catapulted a multitude of Yugoslavs into the endless search for a new home away from home. Of course, that event is tied to the long decade of the 1990s, the War of Yugoslav Succession (1991-1995) and the U.S.-led NATO bombing of its last remnants over the Serbian province of Kosovo. The author's own place in the disappearing literature and culture of Yugoslavia is analyzed in the essay that scholars of Slavic and East European regions will find most enlightening and useful in their teaching and research, "A Question of Perspective." The destiny of so many of us born in a country that is no more demonstrates how the meeting place of diverse cultural traditions that was Yugoslavia gradually yields to the pressures of neo-nationalist thugs, often dressed up in the garb of professors, journalists, and intellectuals.

As is well known, Ugresic was labeled a witch by the nationalist media alongside four

other women writers and intellectuals, all of whose names and addresses were published in the daily press in a veiled invitation to a witch hunt. Her narrators endure the most direct confrontation with the new nationalist sentiment when compared to those of other notable post-Yugoslav authors, like David Albahari and Aleksandar Hemon. This essay provides perhaps the most devastating clinical analysis of nationalism and its banal mechanisms. As in Albahari's short novella *Mrak* (Stubovi kulture, 2008), the narrative device she uses is that of the archive, yet the files of her past life in Yugoslavia are filled to the bursting point with clippings from real newspapers that record the attacks on her as a traitor to her newly resurrected nation of Croatia. "In front of me sits a bulging file containing a mass of Croatian newspaper cuttings from the early 1990's. The newsprint has yellowed a little, the paper become thin. In one breath, it seems this indifferent heap of newsprint has absolutely nothing to do with me; in the next, the old paper cuts like a razor. For a moment (just a moment), fresh blood runs from the wound" (214-15). This is an autobiographical reminiscence which introduces a temporal flow from the past to the present in order to establish the authenticity of both the protagonist and the locations where the author dwells. The city, in which the drama of the author's exclusion from the native realm takes place, is presented as a prop whose own reality is there only to support the replaying of the traumatic displacement that took place in Zagreb decades ago. "It's an icy January in Amsterdam, unusual for the wet Dutch winters. In the warmth of my writing room, I perform my morning ritual —flicking through the online newspapers, Croatian ones among them" (203). Summarizing the fate of subjects that have been doomed to perpetually cross borders of countries and thresholds of identity, Ugresic introduces the continual problem that the transnational subject encounters in attempting to settle down as an immigrant and attain some semblance of local identity. She begins her day in Amsterdam with an imaginary return to the façade of a homeland mediated by the Internet, reading the online newspapers in an attempt to reestablish the connection with the location of her origin. It seems that even the damp Amsterdam climate is affected by the chilly weather emanating from Zagreb, as the narrator begins to delve into the traumatic texture of her past there. The first image she encounters is that of an old man smiling and thumbing his ears at the world, an attitude Ugresic will spend her powerful essay decoding for her Western readers.

"It's the smile of the swindler giving you the finger, his hands buried in his pockets" (204). The irreverence of those who have crossed her and continued to mock her back in Zagreb is what gets the blood flowing from her emotional wound, transforming for a moment her Amsterdam apartment into a battlefield of memory. And for a moment, she is thrown into the same sense of unreality experienced by most post-Yugoslav subjects: "I wonder whether I exist myself, and who's observing whom here: *they* me or me *them*. Then, like an uncoiled spring, a detail I'd never noticed before jumps at me. With a confidence seemingly backed by hard science, some of the stories point the finger at my ethnic background, others hysterically demand that I *finally* declare it myself" (215). Unwilling and unable to yield to the requirements of the new national identity, the post-Yugoslav writers form a diasporic assemblage that can never quite be a community, yet shares a common desire for an ethically uncompromising cosmopolitan space of the future. Dubravka Ugresic has certainly distinguished herself as the leader of this tragic group of itinerant intellectuals, children of Yugoslavia looking for home. Still.

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