

*At the Interface*

# The New Order of War

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# Yugonostalgia and the *Post*-National Narrative

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Memory aids survival.  
- Proust<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Synthetic Realities

In The Hague there exists an 'S/M porno club [...] called the Ministry of Pain' - or so Croatian Dubravka Ugrešić tells us in the opening pages of her 2005 book *The Ministry of Pain* [Ministarstvo boli].<sup>3</sup> The narrator's students, exiles from the war ravaged Yugoslavia who now live in Amsterdam not far from The Hague International Tribunal, work in a sweatshop where they make exotic outfits for the local sex shops. The work was simple, the students said: 'all you had to do was assemble items of sadomasochistic clothing out of leather, rubber and plastic'.<sup>4</sup> Because of its proximity to both the sadomasochistic porn club *and* the famous court that metes out its own version of punishments to the most notorious of international criminals, their nickname for the sweatshop is 'The Ministry'. A

name that turns the reader's attention to justice-related issues such as memory and truth, and hints at the parallels between the artificial reality created in the porn club, the life of an exile who works in the sweatshop to create costumes that aid and abet that false reality, and the synthetically conceived transnational space of the war crimes tribunal.

The Hague is also a space that attempts to go beyond traditional national boundaries and as Ugrešić says, it is 'a place meant to make everybody feel at 'home''. War criminals, but also exiles from that same war, come to the same place to begin the next stage of their life.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the victim and victimiser have both left the scene of the crime, but the spectre of nationalism follows them wherever they may go.

This play with exile, synthetic realities, memory and the attempt to conceptualise a place that transcends national boundaries (such as the international war tribunal) in the opening pages of *The Ministry of Pain*, shows us that in the literature of the former Yugoslavia, narrative is called upon to carry out a complex task. It is asked to function as a disruption of epistemic thought, such as the accepted definition of nation, and to represent a post-war malaise evident during the transitional period both for those who remain in the Balkans and for those who have left for a 'new' life. *The Ministry of Pain* then is a response to, or a thinking-through of war and its haunting 'afterlife.' Here, literature is used as an arbiter between trauma and recovery. At the same time Ugrešić's narrative exposes the fragile and synthetic façade of the nation-state and its effort to control and contain national narratives - to delineate and have power over its own history - while it simultaneously makes a claim to be a transnational project that attempts to shatter preconceived notions of the concepts of 'nation' and 'nationality'. Thus, Ugrešić's text in particular must be studied for its focus on the ongoing struggle for control over historical memory, and the use and abuse of the concept 'Yugonostalgia' in this bitter skirmish to delineate national identity during the transitional period.

Accordingly, this chapter considers how *The Ministry of Pain* examines the ways in which one writes the after-life of a particular war and of a nation. The novel is a consideration of the politically charged neologism Yugonostalgia, and of how exiles, in the attempt to counteract the silence imposed upon them by the state, endeavour to construct histories and communities beyond the state toward something called the post-national narrative. It is a narrative that recognizes the role of official discourse, but attempts to move beyond that discourse and create an alternative space of enunciation. Thus the central question I address here is this: how does literature grapple with the relation between memory and the recent history of a nation while it attempts to create a narrative of a community that is beyond national boundaries? Is there a replacement for what we know as national literature? If so, might there be such a thing as a 'post-national narrative' that

functions as an epistemic break in this continuum about the way that nation and literature are related? Finally, does contemporary literature's attempt to go beyond the border of national literatures add to what one understands about discourses of memory, history and justice or does it only expose a crisis about what literature's role is in a so-called transnational setting?

## 2. Yugonostalgia and Cosmetic Surgery

To better understand Ugrešić's book, one must first consider the concept of 'Yugonostalgia' - an idealistic longing for a time before the war in the Balkans, which occurs during the transitional period in which new political and/or ideological circumstances have arisen. Ugrešić argues that Yugonostalgia is primarily a political weapon used by the state as a response to silence alternative histories. In the Balkans this strangulation of voices has been widespread both during and after the war.

This phenomenon of Yugonostalgia that Ugrešić grapples with in *The Ministry of Pain* can be better comprehended if one considers the historical circumstances both leading up to and during the war in the former Yugoslavia. With the death of Tito, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and vast economic decline in the 1980s, it seemed inevitable that the idea of a unified Yugoslavia would dissolve and newly delineated regions would rise up to identify their 'particular nationalism'.<sup>6</sup> As the Balkan states attempted to separate and establish themselves as autonomous, Croatia's Franjo Tudjman, who was also the former general of Marshall Tito, along with Serb leader Slobodan Milošević, attempted to 're-tailor history'.<sup>7</sup> For example, history did not evolve, so to speak, in Croatia. Rather '[i]n order to provide Croatian statehood with the legitimacy of historical continuity, Tudjman skipped fifty years of 'Yugoslavdom' and grafted the new Croatia directly to the Independent State of Croatia of the 1940s, a Fascist state'.<sup>8</sup> This was both confusing and devastating for those caught in the middle of this swift dissolution. Citizens of these newly formed states were asked to disregard the past that they yearned to return to in the wake of the war (idyllic or not), and instead to look toward the future in which new histories would be written by new powers who, according to Ugrešić, would manipulate that past at any cost. She writes:

They claimed that Yugoslavia was a gigantic lie. The Great Manipulators and their well-equipped teams (composed of writers, colleagues, and even generals!) began to take the gigantic lie apart. . . . They threw ideological formulae out of the dictionary ('brotherhood and unity', 'socialism', 'titoism', etc.) and took down the old symbols (hammer and sickle, red star, Yugoslav flag, national anthem, and Tito's busts). The Great Manipulators and their teams

created a new dictionary of ideological formulae: 'democracy', 'national sovereignty', 'europeanisation', etc. The Great Manipulators had taken apart the old system and built a new one of the identical parts.<sup>9</sup>

Essentially nothing had changed; it was only the existing parts (such as the language, place names and borders) that had been rearranged by the so-called Great Manipulators. In the midst of this rearrangement the people of the former Yugoslavia struggled to hold onto their memories of the pre-war past that they knew as a community, but as Ugrešić asserts, '[t]he right to collective memory was taken from [exiles, refugees, survivors of the war] and all reminiscence about the former life was termed jugonostalgija by ideologists of the new (Yugoslav successor) states'.<sup>10</sup> History was strong-armed by the latest leaders, and their vision of nationalism became the new language. This inability to validate the past made the population even more desperate to construct its own history. Moreover, it did not matter whether that history be based on a 'real' past or a synthetic mythological Yugoslavia just as false as any that might be construed by leaders such as Tudjman. It was a matter of memory aiding survival. It became a tug of war over history, where both sides realized that those with the control over the narratives of the past would have power over those of the present and the future.

As is well known, the attempted manipulation of the discourse of historical memory is not an uncommon occurrence during transitional eras or in other times. For example, the desire to whitewash the recent past exists in many postdictatorship societies in which the aim of neoliberal power is to present the population with an official history whose structure and content resembles that of what Baudrillard calls a 'cosmetically corrected' face.<sup>11</sup> With a bit of cosmetic surgery behind closed doors, the object in question - historical discourse - exits with a more beautiful visage. In this surgically corrected narrative, past, present and future are all synchronized and compatible because they are rewritten to create a synthetic linearity and cohesiveness. The layering of the real and the hyper-real creates an uncanny moment where the border between the real and the imaginary blurs. Like Baudrillard's 'cosmetically corrected' face, the historical narrative results in a synthetic, plastic version of history determined by the desire of the present. Consequently be it *el blanqueo* in post-Pinochet Chile or Yugonostalgia in the Balkans, we see how the uncanny aspect of whitewashing attempts to function a corrective tool and is evident during periods when a cosmetically corrected historical discourse is used to cover or deride alternative histories.

As a politically charged neologism, 'Yugonostalgia' is used by politicians in the Balkans to undermine the reminiscences of a past that they would rather the populace forget. It deems memories of a past, united Yugoslavia to be inane and is a derogatory term, which refers to those who

are nostalgic for the past (often the exile) rather than willing to face what the newly formed government has deemed 'truth' and the 'improved' reality of the present. Yugonostalgia then stands in for the sustained desire of the state to control historical memory and to create an official version of history. Thus, it has been used as a political tool in Croatia and other Balkan states to exclude those whose past is not relevant to the present or future needs of that newly formed nation-state.

Yugonostalgia is also exploited as a way to divide the population between those who fit into the new nation states' discourse and those who do not. In other words, the state appears to use Yugonostalgia as a way of excluding citizens who are not willing to adapt the new discourse. Yet this exclusion from the state appears to be logically impossible because those who are excluded from the vision of the new state are still a sector of bodies that identify with and are included by that nation-state through the act of exclusion. These people might be dubbed as what Agamben refers to as 'bare life' - someone who exists in the law as an exile.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben examines the *homo sacer*, the figure in Roman law who 'may be killed but not sacrificed' for his analysis of notions of sovereignty in postmodern nation-states.<sup>12</sup> Agamben refigures *homo sacer* as the bare life that is held in a position of simultaneous inclusivity and exclusivity through the declaration of a state of exception. The *homo sacer* exposes an unnatural, man-made birth of the sovereign nation-state. In a hierarchical conjunction, the two, *homo sacer* and the sovereign, are reliant on one another. Without the *homo sacer*, there is no affirmation of the sovereign, yet the affirmation of the sovereign creates *homo sacer*, the one who is not sovereign. Hence, in order for a nation-state to define itself, it must define its borders - inclusivity and exclusivity - both aspects essential to the paradigm.

Those who exist both inside and outside of the law (i.e. the jurisdiction of the state) are necessary to the body that excludes them. In the case of a transitional state such as Croatia in the 1990s under Tudjman, the relationship between the sovereign (the state) and the *homo sacer* (the exile) is one of mutual need. The state is able to transform a human into a *homo sacer* through the revocation of citizenship, for example, leaving the *homo sacer* in a state of confusion and lost identity. Yet at the same time that the state excludes them, it needs these bodies of evidence to show what is included and what is excluded.

For these reasons Yugonostalgia as a means of historical discourse is important not only to those who are outcast from the state, but also to the state itself because the state needs an enemy to counter as it rebuilds its past in sight of the present and future. As with Baudrillard's reading of cosmetic surgery, there must be something before (the imperfect visage) that needs to be fixed, manipulated and ultimately beautified. This would be the past that

Yugonostalgia is said to evoke, and therefore must be fixed, cleaned up, and rewritten for the new order. The exile and his or her attempt to write memories of the time before the war, problematises the relation between nation, the exile and claims in historical memory, and should be further examined.

### 3. The Exile, Yugonostalgia and Nation

The relationship between the exile, Yugonostalgia and nation can be better understood through the first person account of the Yugoslavian exile Tanja Lucić in Ugrešić's *The Ministry of Pain*. It should be noted that Lucić clearly acts as a political conduit for the author who herself fled the former Yugoslavia in 1993 and now lives in Amsterdam and that the life of the protagonist loosely parallels that of Ugrešić. Assigned to teach Serbo-Croatian literature at the University of Amsterdam, Lucić's story is a clever polemic about the psychological and physical state of the exile that must live with the traumatic past, while she attempts to establish a new life abroad. In a classroom filled with other twenty and thirty something exiles like herself, Lucić decides that rather than teach a language that no longer officially exists, Serbo-Croatian, she will encourage her students to reconstruct their pasts by writing essays that guide their Yugonostalgia and therefore their memories of both Yugoslavian culture before the war and the subsequent disintegration of it. There would be no such thing as an a-political classroom because according to Lucić, politics had already decided the fate of her discipline. She says,

I was naturally well aware of the absurdity of my situation: I was to teach a subject that officially no longer existed. What we once called *jugoslavistika* at the university - that is, Slovenian, Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian, Montenegrin, and Macedonian literature - had disappeared as a discipline together with its country of origin.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, she and the students would travel to a time before the war to recuperate memories that the leaders of the newly formed nation-states would rather they forget. By the end of the book the reader will come to see that her project to subvert authority and redesign her class around Yugonostalgia in the hopes that her student-exiles will create a new type of community will ultimately fail, and what the reader understands of Lucić and she of herself will radically changes as she comes to realize her own fate. Yet, the first half of the book is an exploration of the collected memories of these fellow exiles as they are offered an opportunity to tell personal stories which in other more politicised contexts (such as back 'home' in Croatia or Serbia) would be

framed as subversive histories and exorcised from the discourse of post-war nations as mere utopian myths.

In an attempt to witness the trauma of war *The Ministry of Pain* follows the lives of the students and their interactions with Lucić by way of the 'Yugonostalgias' they present for their homework. Each student is asked to draw from his or her own memory, from his or her own familiar past, and to write about what stands out in that personal history. At first this seems simple. Though varied in subject matter, their stories that recall the times when there was a so-called unified nation of Yugoslavia before Tito's death in 1980 and the decade leading to the war appear to unify the diverse classroom space and, to some extent, calm the underlying national tensions that occasionally surface amongst the students.

With each story prefaced by its author's name, the subject matter ranges from 'Meliha: Bosnian Hotpot'<sup>14</sup> (directions for how to make a traditional dish), to 'Dakko: My Mother Holds Hands with Tito'<sup>15</sup> (a memory of his mother as a Pioneer who meets Tito) to 'Igor: Horror and Horticulture'<sup>16</sup> (comments on the demographics of Yugoslav poetry).<sup>17</sup> Yet as one reads more of these, it can be seen that they get darker and gloomier in tone. For example, in 'I Wish I Were a Nightingale,' Uroš tells the story about how as a very young child he was assigned to write a poem to Tito after the leader had had his leg cut off and was recovering from the operation.<sup>18</sup> Uroš wrote that he wished that he 'were a nightingale so [he] could fly to Comrade Tito's hospital bed . . .'.<sup>19</sup> What begins as a somewhat charming story, a small child writing to his national leader, quickly spirals downward into a critique of the hypocrisy of the student's own family and culture, and ends with the telling lines: 'Yugoslavia was a terrible place. Everybody lied. They still lie of course, but now each lie is divided by five, one per country.'<sup>20</sup>

As Lucić urges the students to write their memories, a forum develops in the classroom, which extends to after hours meetings in the pubs and streets of Amsterdam that appears to function as an alternative space for the exchange of personal histories and the recuperation of memory. The extended classroom acts as a depository of memories in which the exiles can immerse themselves in their 'Yugonostalgias' beyond the institutional walls of the university.

Early on though, Lucić has her doubts about such a utopian project both in and outside of the classroom. She writes:

I realized I was walking a tightrope: stimulating the memory was as much a manipulation of the past as banning it. The authorities in our former country had pressed the delete button, I the restore button; they were erasing the Yugoslav past, blaming Yugoslavia for every misfortune,

including the war, I reviving that past in the form of the everyday minutiae that had made up our lives, operating a volunteer lost-and-found service, if you will.<sup>21</sup>

Even as she makes the decision to go ahead with her project of Yugonostalgia she is wary of the affects it might have and aware of the subjectivity of memory. Whether or not this exchange helps the exile-students in matters such as how to work through personal pain or how to obtain some form of justice for the crimes that led to their condition, will never be clearly resolved. Yet, even here in the beginning Lucić is wary that 'Perhaps by stimulating memories of the past [she] would destroy its halo. Or perhaps [her] attempt to reconstruct the past would end in no more than a pale imitation, thus exposing the poverty of the 'baggage' we deemed so powerful.'<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, she goes ahead with the classroom project, because, as she says 'it was too late: I had set the gears in motion and could no longer stop them'.<sup>23</sup>

As the exile-students in *The Ministry of Pain* attempt to recuperate memories while they form a new community in exile, they also embark on a project that reconsiders the nuances of their own identities alongside the meanings of nationality and nation. This identity crisis is reflected in the daily lives of the students and their attempt to control language. For example, they no longer know what to call themselves: 'Yugoslavia, the country where they'd been born, where they'd come from, no longer existed. They did their best to deal with it by steering clear of the name, shortening it to Yuga ... or playfully transforming it into Titoland or the Titanic. As for its inhabitants, they became Yugos or, more often, simply 'our people'.<sup>24</sup> Yet in exile in the Netherlands they have little control over the language that defines them - they are written off as those who have no control over their identity. As Lucić remarks, 'they were stigmatised as 'the beneficiaries of political asylum'', as 'refugees', as 'children of post-Communism', 'the fallout of Balkanisation', or as 'savages'.<sup>25</sup>

This identity crisis is a micro-reflection of the immense amount of discourse that has been produced about Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the war. This conversation is consumed with questions about the relation between historical memory and national identity, which often have conflicting answers. For example, how does one shrug off a national identity that he or she has been indoctrinated into and begin again? It is not easy, but as Andrew Baruch Wachtel points out in *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia*, it might be possible that national identity can be unlearned and re-learned. Wachtel writes:

It is, after all, a fiction to think that most people independently choose their national identity. Rather, people

have to be taught what a nation is in the first place (for the very concept of a nation is modern, dating back at the earliest to the seventeenth century) and then how to identify with 'their own nation'. Given that this is so, they can also be retaught, and their national identity and ways of viewing it can change ...<sup>26</sup>

If one can be 'retaught' national identity, as is the desire of the newly formed Balkan states, he or she may be able to create other kinds of identities in other communities that are not necessarily based on nationalism. As Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities*, communities 'are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the way in which they are imagined'.<sup>27</sup> It is a matter of re-imagining oneself, and through this act perhaps opening up a space for a new definition of community.

Both the loss of national identity and the way that both that lost nation and the new community are imagined, is a central concern that arises in *The Ministry of Pain* which attempts to create a narrative that elucidates the complexities of the experience of a community of exiles. As the students tell their stories, Lucić comes to the realization that what they were saying was 'untranslatable'. She states, 'we were speaking an extinct language comprehensible only to ourselves'.<sup>28</sup> The language of Yugonostalgia had become a private language among Lucić's exiles. And if communication to 'outsiders' was seemingly impossible, it was also becoming apparent that the same problem existed amongst themselves to a certain extent. They were only an 'imagined community' of discontinuity brought together as a result of their political status and perhaps united by nothing more than their desire to sustain their imagined relationship. For this community to work, it had to keep re-imagining itself.

Thus, there arises a self-awareness about the peculiar community of exiles suffering from so-called Yugosnostalgitis, if you will, in which they have found themselves. As Serbs, Bosnians, Croatians and even a Dutch woman who spoke 'the language' of the student-exiles with a Bosnian accent, they are aware of both the seriousness and the absurdity of Yugonostalgia to 'fix' anything. They all make light of the idea repeatedly. For example, in a critique of the nostalgia for another time and place, the Dutch student Johanneke<sup>29</sup> who had been married to a Bosnian but is now divorced with two children, comes to class with Bosnian food that she has bought from a delicatessen during a trip to Rotterdam which she labels, 'First-Aid Kit for Yugosnostalgitis'.<sup>30</sup> As one might use sterilizer to clean the bacteria out of a fresh wound, the students eat the food, temporarily medicate the festering of an internal wound, and momentarily the yearning for a return to the past. Therefore, even as they interact in the classroom and meet socially in different parts of the city to exchange stories, there is always the underlying

reality that most of them are, in one way or another, refugees from a nation and a history that is no longer allowed to exist. They have temporarily been thrown together like a group of addicts searching for a quick fix of the past on the streets of Amsterdam.

Even as the student-exiles become conscious of the weaknesses of Yugonostalgia, they appear to be motivated to continue the practice to establish a space of enunciation outside of the nation in which they grew up. This leads to a question that becomes even more entangled in the obscure relationship between exile and nation. Is there a possibility to create a language and a community that functions beyond the nation-state paradigm? Or is this only a literary utopia in which the aggressor (the State) is demonised, and the victims (the student-exiles) are held up as the possessors of truth? These are struggles that arise in the first half of the book in which there seems to be no way to move beyond the hegemonic voice of nation for the exile. Hence a conflict becomes apparent. For the exile, there is the need to move away from nation, but at the same time the exile must continually revert to references about the nation as he or she attempts to create a 'new' language that re-imagines a community that transcends nation.

It is not surprising that Ugrešić explores ways to rise out of these paradoxes. As a vehement polemicist against the manipulation of historical memory and the dangers of 'forgetting', she asserts that Croatians in the post-war period have been scorned for any mention of a Yugoslav past that might injure the fragile historical discourse of the present. It is supposed that the post-war re-structuring would create radically different and separate nation states but as Wachtel aptly says:

Perhaps if one is a true Croatian or Serbian nationalist it is possible to convince oneself that the sacrifices - political, economic, and moral - have been worth it, but most others would probably agree that the ravaged economies, the millions of refugees, the thousands of rapes and murderers, and the incalculable psychic damage sustained by both the victims and victors was a high price to pay for the creation of five independent South Slavic states. This is particularly true given the fact that so little has actually changed in the new countries, for in great measure the new is merely a repackaged but far less creative version of the old . . . .<sup>31</sup>

After the horror of the war, the actual changes are few and slight in many cases. The violent physical restructuring of Yugoslavia, was intended to coincide with, or be closely followed by, a psychological and linguistic restructuring that would parallel the new countries' identities. No matter how subtle the distinction was between the new nation-states, it was necessary to

accentuate difference, and language was often at the centre of this positioning. Ugrešić shows us just how easily language can both create and obliterate a concept of so-called national unity:

Language was a weapon, after all: it branded, it betrayed, it separated and united. Croats would eat their *kruh*, while Serbs would eat their *hleb*, Bosnians their *hljeb*: the word for bread in the three languages was different. *Smrt*, the word for death, was the same.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, this reorganization was coupled with the stifling of a hard-won unified Yugoslav tradition and a rejection of anything that hinted at a united Yugoslavia. For Ugrešić the only thing that they have left in common is their mortality.

No matter how hard the student-exiles try to live in the present and create a new space of community, the past continues to haunt the present. The thing they share, *smrt* (death), hits hard at the beginning of the third section of the novel when Lucić returns from the break in which she had spent a bittersweet week in Croatia with her mother. When she arrives to campus she is told in an offhand manner by a secretary that one of her students was dead. He had committed suicide over the break. She immediately starts to collect the bits and pieces of the story of Uroš's death from her students.

Yes, they'd heard that Uroš had killed himself. No, they didn't know how it had happened. . . . Oh, and that Uroš's father was suspected of war crimes and was currently under interrogation at the Hague Tribunal. No, they'd had no idea, no idea about his father.<sup>33</sup>

As they slowly bring the fragments together, the students admit that they really never knew Uroš well. His life was a secret to them. The only remnant they have is his story about Tito and the Nightingale. Hence, Uroš is just another casualty of the war that they are all trying to escape but that continually haunts them. Their imagined community is not immortal. It is not untouchable. It has limits which can be trespassed and violated, and which are as unstable as their new lives in Amsterdam. Thus, even as they try to create a reality outside of the former Yugoslavia, the former reality that they tried to leave repeatedly impacts them - sometimes fatally.

As the lives of the characters in *The Ministry of Pain* unfold so does Ugrešić's biting critique of nationalism as she strives to untangle some of the complexities of memory and the construction of history in Yugoslavia. According to Anderson, the nation can be defined as 'an imagined political

community . . . which is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' and nationalism as that which 'invents nations where they do not exist'.<sup>34</sup> One must remember that essentially the nation and state are distinct entities yet the dream of the state is to become conflated with the dream of the nation and this is where nationalism is created. It is the fantasy for this corrupt marriage to become naturalized to the point in which ethnicity, race etc. and citizenship (or even the biological and the political) have become one psychotic union of identity in which one believes it cannot exist without the other.

Ugrešić considers what lies behind the different masks that both the exile and the modern day nation wear as she attempts to break down the myths on all sides without creating new ones in their place. Nationalism, Ugrešić asserts, serves many different needs and ' . . . is a struggle for the control of collective memory'.<sup>35</sup> She continues:

. . . at certain moments nationalism becomes an ideological refuge for those who do not have anything else. Nationalism is also a collective therapy . Nationalism also means being in power to change cultural memory, to rewrite it, touch it up, falsify it and contract it, all in order to preserve the 'truth' and 'history'.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, she says, it is similar to a disease that kills many, yet whose origin and disseminators remain largely unknown, and 'Yugonostalgia' is one of the most deadly strains of this disease.<sup>37</sup> As she explains,

. . . we had been deprived of what was our right to remember. With the disappearance of the country came the feeling that the life lived in it must be erased. The politicians who came to power were not satisfied with power alone; they wanted their new countries to be populated by zombies, people with no memory.<sup>38</sup>

Ugrešić paints a picture of an apocalyptic society whose leaders wish for the population to return to a glorious past that never existed in the first place. Perhaps what has happened in newly-formed nation-states in Yugoslavia is not as radical as something like the Khmer Rouge's desire to turn the clocks to year zero in Cambodia. Yet historical discourse in the Balkans would be splintered and compartmentalized to erase the past (a 'unified' Yugoslavia) to fit the new self-image of each nation-state.

Ugrešić employs the term 'confiscated memories' to describe this attempt at erasure. 'Confiscated' is often used in situations that are law-related, or include some kind of authority figure. To have something

confiscated is to unwillingly release a personal possession to an authorial figure, for example. As children, our parents 'confiscated' our toys when we acted out in some way or misused them. As adults, confiscation takes a more serious turn. Our passport is confiscated if we are accused of breaking a law and going beyond the boundary of acceptability. To confiscate a memory then is to violently strip that memory of one jurisdiction and shift it to another to satisfy the other's desire *that others desire* for a certain historical memory. Memory, personal and subjective, is used as a political tool when it subsumed by a nation-state and deemed to be the memory of a people, when it is in fact only the newly written narrative of a nation-state that exists in the hope that no one will attempt to look behind the façade to find only emptiness.

As a consequence, in *The Ministry of Pain* it becomes apparent that Ugrešić wishes to identify the power struggles over memory and history on all sides but privileges the exile. Yet, the question is whether the exile can move beyond the circumscribed idea of nation in which he or she has been socialized to create some other space of enunciation that does not necessarily hearken back to the nation. In other words, in all of these literary and linguistic games of memory and history, one must ask a key question: Is it possible to move outside of 'nation', or is that merely the unfulfilled yet ongoing dream of the exile? It is seemingly a dream because the exile in *The Ministry of Pain* is caught in a paradox. When he or she is accused of Yugonostalgia by the newly-formed state, he or she is simultaneously recognized by the state, and enveloped into its discourse as the necessary other - the outsider who attempts to create his or her own way of speaking about the after-life of war, (such as with the 'First-Aid Kit') who the state must counteract. The state bases its functionality on the forgetfulness of its citizens and its ability to 'confiscate' memories.

The way that *The Ministry of Pain* highlights the function of state in its relation to historical discourse, and how it points out what the state must both include and exclude to exist is what marks this text as one that attempts to break new literary ground. It is a narrative that creates a caesura or epistemological break in the accepted framework of the traditional national narrative and creates new ground and possibility for historical discourse that speaks to something beyond the restrictions of the national space and nationalism. That is to say, *The Ministry of Pain* points to something that might be called the *post*-national narrative which refers to a caesura in the embedded tradition of national literatures and the role they are expected to play as representatives of the state to some extent.

*Post*-national narrative, as read here, is one which draws attention to the synthetic relationship between the state and literature and looks for different ways to write about exile, human rights, systematic violence, physical displacement and psychological trauma. It is deemed 'post' because it



distinguishes itself in the attempt to create narratives that do not speak for or from a particular nation, and as that, which takes into account the fluidity of borders in the postmodern world. Thus, while it is understood that literature is always engaged to some extent in a conversation with nationalism, the post-national narrative calls attention to the inability to mark a complete rupture with that relation (the relation with the state) while it simultaneously opens onto new possibilities for a type of literature that creates narratives that go beyond traditional parameters and definitions of the national narrative.

The possibility for the post-national narrative can be further elucidated in a discussion about the role of justice in the contemporary world, and how this abstract concept that is still undefined is used in *The Ministry of Pain* as another way to call to attention the imagined relation between the nation-state in the Balkans and the exile.

#### 4. [Yugo]Nostalgic Justice

In his discussion about politics and the State<sup>39</sup> in *Metapolitics*, Alain Badiou breaches the question of what justice is and how it functions in the state apparatus. More specifically, he hones in on a question that concerns human rights' theorists:

We must set out from the following premise: injustice is clear, justice is obscure. For whoever endures injustice is its indubitable witness. But who can testify for justice? There is an affect of injustice, a suffering, revolt. But there is nothing to indicate justice, which presents neither spectacle, nor sentiment.<sup>40</sup>

According to Badiou there exist witnesses to 'injustice' who can speak to that injustice to some extent because injustice has some kind of suffering attached to it. Even if the affects are psychological rather than physical, it still has an object. Yet 'justice' is unclear as it has no object. It is abstract. Justice may only show itself in some form of punishment, for example, in the imposed suffering on those who committed the injustice in the first place. In other words, there is a physical consequence that can be seen. In this reading one might believe that something such as the enactment of *Hammurabi's Code* on the violator of the law was effective for the way that it showed the implementation of a form of justice, subjective as the punishment might be, for unjust acts to the citizens. It is through this method that the population came to understand that there was a given and therefore accepted equivalence between a crime and its punishment, no matter how abstract. Similarly, one can see this acceptance in modern times in which money as the payment of a fine often replaces corporeal punishment for the very same crime. What this means is that essentially for justice to function successfully the non-relation

between the crime and the punishment must be forgotten and there must be belief that there is equivalence between the two. Yet, as Badiou discusses the historical development of the concept of 'justice' he also surmises that '... even by drawing on a history ... we still have no clear idea of what this word [justice] means today'.<sup>41</sup>

In *The Ministry of Pain* the examination of justice and memory add to the book's development of the possibility for a post-national narrative. Not so subtly hinted at in Ugrešić's book is the way the relationship between exile, memory and justice are posited to create an identity that is not necessarily connected to one specific nation state but yet somehow moves beyond the restricted borders established by politics to another space of enunciation. Yugonostalgic justice, if one can call it that, is the attempt to gain justice through remembering. It is through the creation or recreation of a history before the war (although as fallible as any history) that there is an attempt to indicate justice.

The narrator Lucić believes that she is subverting the institutions that try to control her, including the nation-state and the university to some extent, and attaining justice when she changes the course curricula from the study of Serbo-Croatian literature and language to journal writing that concentrates on Yugonostalgia. Her exile-students must not only remember, but they must write these memories down, and by doing so create a space of enunciation that is privileged to the exiles from Yugoslavia and which turns its back on the state's supposed control of historical discourse. For Lucić, to remember the past is to make sense of the present and go on to the future. To remember is to open the way for the exile-students to create narratives not directly connected to Yugoslavia before, during or after the war.

Part of moving past the trauma of the war and its aftermath lies in Lucić's theory that if the students can reminisce about the time before the war began, they can also aid the process of healing, and perhaps attain some kind of justice, by showing evidence that something else exists beyond the petty fights between the Balkan states. This is exactly the opposite of what the new states mean by healing. Healing in a place such as the newly formed Croatia would mean forgetting about the past, about any notion of a unified Yugoslavia, and instead following the re-written historical discourse of the newly formed state. In the attempt to obtain justice through the recuperation of memory, there is the expectation that the staunch nationalism that was one of the causes of the war will be replaced with a world, an environment, in which former national identities fade, and the border lines are obscured and blended, toward an existence that is neither based nor dependent on national identity, but that moves beyond this trope. Justice as viewed through the lens of a narrative that does not depend on the new order, but creates a community outside of that order, becomes one more way to subvert or deride the national narrative.

This can be better understood in a turning point in *The Ministry of Pain*, which involves a trip to see 'justice in action'. The suicide of her Serbian student Uroš and the discovery that his father is accused of war crimes and will be tried leads Lucić to take a day trip with another student, Igor, to the Hague Tribunal to visit the ICTFY (the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia). Once there the two hope to gain some insight into what actually goes on between the walls of this famous institution that Lucić remarks looks like 'Yugoslav socialist architecture of the sixties and seventies' but 'UN style'.<sup>42</sup> What the two find there is another institution that has no answers for the exiles of the former Yugoslavia, a place that exposes the fallibility and perhaps incomprehensibility of justice, and therefore another piece in the game of naming alongside empty promises of truth, justice and reconciliation for all involved. Lucić remarks:

The words we heard, switching channels from time to time to hear how things sounded in English, French, or Dutch, were in any case unreal. The reality the glass wall separated us from inspired no more confidence than 'real' reality: both of them - the one that churned out lies, lies, and more lies and the one that promised the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth - were equally fantastic, if that is the word for it.<sup>43</sup>

Lucić paints a picture of the Tribunal as a synthetic space that has established itself as both supranational i.e. judges without bias, and also as transnational i.e. it judges specific nations and the crimes committed in those nations according to a globally based legal code. Parallel to this, Yugoslavia was also synthetically created after World War I in the hopes that it would overlook its differences and become a transnational space that celebrated unity. The regions of the now defunct nation shared a language and were therefore brought together according to this logic to share an identity - even if this identity was not a natural relation. In order for this unification to work, the synthetic origin of its conception, its birth, if you will, had to be forgotten and faith had to be put into the new order of a unified Yugoslavia just as with the Tribunal. One has to have faith in the courts in order for them to work.<sup>44</sup> One has to have faith in the nation for it to work.

Yet forgetting difference is a very difficult thing to do. The war in the former Yugoslavia, which lasted roughly from the siege of Sarajevo in April of 1992 until February 1996, left the country in ruins. After the death of Tito Yugoslavia quickly broke apart, and in the rearrangement of the different states, thousand of its inhabitants, including Bosnians, Croatians and Serbians, were subject to the newly formed states who would decide their future. Furthermore, the people of the former nation would be subjected to

the minute details of the crimes against humanity committed, which would slowly seep into the public sphere, and ultimately be played out in the most public theatre on earth: The Hague international tribunal for crimes against humanity which also promises a type of transnational justice.

Ugrešić's exiles who live in the shadow of The Hague, which seems to function symbolically as a sieve for pain in the book, and another failed institution, would like to attain justice and to believe in the institutions that have informed their lives; the nation-state of Yugoslavia; The Hague; and now the classroom in Amsterdam. Yet, nothing is what it seems. The act of justice in The Hague is merely a 'fantastic' spectacle without substance in *The Ministry of Pain*. This impossible dream of true justice and real retribution is underscored by Badiou who writes that '[w]e have too often wished for justice to fund the consistency of the social bond, whereas in reality it can only name the most extreme moments of inconsistency'.<sup>45</sup> Instead of acting as a bond to bring together society, as happens with many institutions, those presented by Ugrešić begin to be seen through or to break down as time passes and instead of displaying substance they reveal 'extreme moments of inconsistency'. The experiences of the student-exiles parallel to some extent what Lucić and Igor see on their visit to the Hague - only a synthetic reality - a violent spectacle of lives that have been ruptured.

This break down of the world as they know it grows even more serious in Ugrešić's book as Lucić suffers multiple shocks including Uroš's suicide; the university administration's undermining of her course by informing her that one of her students has reported on her; and her own militant reaction to that information that she sublimates into the classroom environment.

In the final section of *The Ministry of Pain* any hope of the formation of a real communal bond between Lucić and her exile-students is completely eradicated when she is held prisoner and tortured in her own apartment by one of her now ex-students, Igor. In a violent scene, Igor ties her up and slashes her wrists with a razor blade - not to kill her, but to permanently mark her, while he tells Lucić that he and the other exile-students made up all of their Yugonostalgic stories. He asks:

Tell me, has it occurred to you that all that time you may have been torturing us? Has it occurred to you that the students you forced to remember were yearning to forget? That they made up memories to indulge you the way that Papuans made up cannibalistic myths to indulge the anthropologists?<sup>46</sup>

In the first half of the book Ugrešić leads the reader to believe that he or she is witnessing the act of witnessing through these Yugonostalgic stories. The

reader is lead to believe in the power of the past and historical memory and that there are narratives which can counteract state controlled discourse. But this gesture is undermined by the suggestion in the end that, seemingly like every other institutional space presented in the book, it is more lies made up in the space of a synthetic academic institution. If we are to believe Igor, the students only act to appease. Lucić has become an institutional figure, her classroom yet another ministry of pain. The student-exiles narrate not to live as Scheherazade in the *Arabian Nights*, but merely to survive yet another institution of pain - one that asks them to indulge their Yugonostalgia and therefore the pain of something they would rather forget. If what Igor says is true, then they were forced to create memories that they had never experienced in the first place.

Ugrešić leaves it open as to whether Igor is telling the truth. In doing that she shows us the fallibility of language, justice, memory and history. Yet whether what Igor say is true or not, *The Ministry of Pain* points to the impossibility of communal memory in such circumstances, and to the complexities of the discourses of war and their relationship to literature. If it is indeed a post-national narrative, then it is a literature, which attempts to go beyond nation, and in this gesture establishes perhaps a small opening toward a literature that does not necessarily rely on the comfort zone or the traditional parameters of the national narrative.

## 5. Conclusions

In one of her books, [Ugrešić] recalls being stopped at customs in Western Europe and asked to fill in the blank for 'nationality'. She wanted to be called 'anational' or at least 'other', but such a category was not part of the bureaucratic repertoire.<sup>47</sup>

There is no doubt that Ugrešić carries her own trauma of exile and loss of nation like an indecipherable identity card, which will never name who she is. Thus, *The Ministry of Pain* reflects her own pain as she tries to understand the past and the present, and to find her own space in a post-Yugoslavian world that has gone through radical change during her lifetime. Although it is written through the eyes of a fictional character, it is a very personal narrative that speaks to a turbulent era in world politics. In light of this, what does Dubravka Ugrešić's book about Yugonostalgia add to the conversation about the relationship between the nation-state, memory and justice?

Upon reflection, *The Ministry of Pain* is a narrative of the pain of a former nation-state acted out through the bodies of its people within the auspices of other institutions including the justice system, the university and

even the book. This text further problematises our dependence upon and belief in the intuitions that we have available for better understanding war, transition and justice. The court, the classroom, the country and the book are all institutionalised forms of organization that try to make sense senselessness and to give a name, a form, an object to that which has no name.

Yet in an era when the viability of literature as a mode to understand issues such as justice and politics is often questioned and academics attempt to rename and reclassify it as 'transnational' or 'post-national' does a text such as *The Ministry of Pain* account for the deflation of the false value attached to, and the politicisation of, national literature? It is true that many want literature to refer back to a certain politics - issues of the state - interactions with that state - and this author does not call for the obliteration of national literatures or their agency - if that were even possible. One must recognize the need to address writing about and by those who reject the nation-state paradigm or who are rejected by it, yet, (as in the case of Agamben's *homo sacer*), are intimately connected to it. *The Ministry of Pain* addresses some of these questions about the role of literature to act as an effective and powerful conduit for expanding one's understanding and knowledge of memory, history and politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Hence, we may read *The Ministry of Pain* as a post-national narrative which marks the possibility that literature's conversation, its dialogue with the state, has shifted to place the importance of the state on trial and to break down its synthetic façade for what it is. Post-national narratives may simply be the caesura that alters or pushes the position of what is thought possible in the study of literature. *The Ministry of Pain* points to the institutionalisation of the discourse of pain and justice and the spectacle of it, whether the action plays out in The Hague, the classroom or the novel.

Thus, as a post-national narrative *The Ministry of Pain* does not offer an end to the pain of war, nor does it presume to be the answer to the on-going questions of how to write memory and attain justice in the face of injustice and the hegemony of nation-states. Yet in the milieu of post-war discourse, here is a case in which literature might succeed or at least better communicate abstract concepts about certain issues where the milieus of history or political science, for example, may sometimes fall short. Oftentimes these disciplines make a claim to truth rather than problematising it. Ugrešić does not make a claim to truth except in the impossibility of it, but attempts to bridge a gap between the written word and experience without assuming too much. It is literature which poses questions about truth and events thought to be incongruous and takes a risk by placing them side by side (such as a porn shop and the ministry of justice) to create new relations and new angles from which to think through complex issues that plague humankind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The answers may not necessarily lie in this act itself, but from this literary gesture and others like it we may begin to see new relations and ideas that we had not thought before. Ugrešić's work on Yugonostalgia and narrative then is radical for the relations that it attempts to think through and for the possibilities that it opens onto in regard to memory, history and nation. She does not suppose that we all would like to witness or to tell our horror stories. She does not even presume that we all even have stories to tell. Rather, Ugrešić attempts to peel away the synthetic façades of the institutions that we find comfort in and present a meditation that is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but perhaps realistic.

### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> D Ugrešić, *The Ministry of Pain*, HarperCollins, New York, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Ugrešić, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ugrešić, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ugrešić, p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> A B Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, p. 230.

<sup>7</sup> D Ugrešić, 'The Souvenirs of Communism: Home as Marketplace or Deletion of the Past', *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, vol.7, 2005, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ugrešić, 'Souvenirs', p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> D Ugrešić, *Kultura Lazi (Antipoliticki Eseji)*, Arkzin, Zagreb, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Ugrešić, *Kultura*, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> J Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, Verso, New York, 1993, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> G Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, pp. 71-74.

<sup>17</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>18</sup> In the beginning of 1990 Tito's left leg was amputated owing to circulation problems. He died in May 1980 in a clinic in Slovenia.

<sup>19</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> Ugrešić *Ministry*, p. 13. Ugrešić went into exile in 1993 after the death of Tudjman. This is when she realized that the 'Yugoslavian heritage she had grown up with - a pan-slavian communality, held together by the firm Titoist hand - was suddenly gone.' See <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/ugresicd/museum.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Wachtel, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> B Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 57.

<sup>29</sup> The entire section reads as follows: 'Johanneke was Dutch. She spoke 'our language' fluently and with a Bosnian accent. Her parents were Dutch leftists who had built roads and railway tracks with international youth brigades after World War II. Later they went to the Dalmatian coast as tourists. During one of their stays, Johanneke visited Sarajevo, fell in love with a Bosnian, and was stranded there for awhile' - Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Wachtel, p. 231.

<sup>32</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 126.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> S Boym, 'Dubravka', *Bomb*, 2002, p. 74.

<sup>36</sup> Boym, 79.

<sup>37</sup> Boym, pp. 78-79.

<sup>38</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> Badiou capitalizes 'State'; in his work.

<sup>40</sup> A Badiou, *Metapolitics*, Verso, London, 2006, p. 96.

<sup>41</sup> Badiou, p. 102.

<sup>42</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 139.

<sup>43</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 141.

<sup>44</sup> See Wachtel for further discussion.

<sup>45</sup> Badiou, p. 104.

<sup>46</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry*, p. 207.

<sup>47</sup> Boym, p. 74.

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