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Civilization's Wild East: Narrating Eastern Europe's Communism and Post-communism (dissertation, University of Florida 2006)

## Croatian, Balkan, Eastern European, or "Other"? Dubravka Ugrešić and the Condition of Global Dissidence

Like Slavoj Žižek, the contemporary Croatian author Dubravka Ugrešić also grapples with the process of ethnic self-differentiation in *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan Wars to the American Dream*, dramatizing the trauma of undecided Balkan identities which perpetually long for the mythical West, yet can never merit its acceptance. A political exile from Croatia, Dubravka Ugrešić develops *Have a Nice Day* as a series of cultural reflections about the relationship between her abandoned East and her newly acquired West. In contact with the West (initially Holland and more prominently, the United States), Ugrešić's essays embody a conflict between, on the one hand, the discourse of globalization—for her a traditional colonial narrative which proffers Western models as a goal for the West's "others"—and on the other hand, a questioning of such a discourse.

While she initially positions herself as an Eastern European "other," denouncing Yugoslav "backwards" nationalism and celebrating Western Europe and the United States as leaders in the march towards global progress, Ugrešić ends up criticizing streamlining Western multiculturalism which to her reflects the process of globalization, promoting globally recognizable and thus consumable "identities." Because this conflict remains largely unresolved, Ugrešić establishes herself as a dissident from both former Yugoslavia's ("Eastern") nationalist euphoria and American ("Western") stultifying multiculturalism. Noting that both ideologies, while seemingly contradictory, depend on clear identity politics as the zero degree of any political action or privilege, Ugrešić struggles to locate another way of operating in the modern world. Particularly interesting for our purposes is her attempt to resurrect and piece together the old Yugoslavia which is being destroyed physically and discredited discursively—with the aid of local nationalist as well as global multiculturalist narratives. At the beginning of the book, Ugrešić's escape from war-torn Croatia to Amsterdam lands her thoughts in the midst of Orientalist binaries, which provide a framework for her reflections on the East-West divide:

In the Bodega Kayzer café I drink coffee and write down pairs of opposites. Left— right; organized—disorganized; democracy—democratic symbols as a substitute for democracy; civilized—primitive; . . . rational consciousness—mythic consciousness; facing the future—a necrophiliac preoccupation with the past; predictability—unpredictability; an orderly system of criteria and values—absence of system; individual consciousness—collective consciousness; citizen— nationality. I fill the left-hand column under the heading Western Europe, the right under Eastern Europe. (22)

At this point, Ugrešić assigns the first items in the binaries a more privileged position, while taking upon herself the burden of inferiority that the second items entail. She personifies Eastern Europe as a "sister" she cannot escape: a disgracefully uncivilized double who wears "cheap make-up," "talks too loudly," "wipes its lips with its hand," and whose desperate eyes reveal a "need to stop being a second-class citizen and become someone" (23). This almost contemptuous realization of one's own insignificance and peripheral status is further enhanced by Ugrešić's references to Croatia's desire to have its civil war misery recognized by the West. Her mother persistently asks, "And do they know about us over there? Do they write about us?" (32). They don't, Ugrešić implies, because the "beautiful Western Europe" can afford to think about more important things than the misery of its "others" (26).

Her denunciation of the then nationalist politics in Croatia labels Ugrešić as a "permanent émigré" from her own country and intensifies her association of the Balkans with intolerance, brutality and moral degradation, qualities which place them at odds with the "civilized" West (224). As Ugrešić explains to her bewildered New York shrink, "I come from a phallic culture, male; a culture of batons, sticks and knives, according to need" (53). Later she painstakingly enumerates all that is wrong with her Balkan land— "mythic, tribal thinking , . . . primitive, savage ways, . . . illiteracy, . . . the criminal mentality, . . . the newly composed rural mentality which weeps as it kills and kills as it weeps" (54). These qualifications have their implied, more positive opposites—values that, in Ugrešić's

reflections, are scarce in the Balkans. This "lack" reifies the Balkans as a place which Western modernity has side-stepped; indeed, the Balkans' ideological displacement from modern Europe is reflected in the shrink's incredulous reaction to Ugrešić's horror story: "I doubt that any of that can be taking place in the heart of Europe, on the threshold of the twenty-first century" (55).

Juxtaposed to this wounded Balkan/East European image is Ugrešić's portrayal of the West, particularly the United States, as an organized, smoothly functioning, rational society, leader to the global future, the exploration of which affords her much amusement. An exile-flaneur, Ugrešić becomes enchanted with the vibrancy of New York streets and declares that it is "not a city of dreams, it is a city built by us, dreamers" (214). By describing New York as a city of "us" and not "them," Ugrešić appropriates her new abode as an outgrowth of her own American dream among others and expresses her solidarity with this collective "imagined community" of New York immigrants. This feeling of communion also signals that she might be able to rebuild her shattered sense of home in this alien country. As she smiles the "smile of a convalescent," sitting on a Central Park bench, New York allows Ugrešić to recuperate from personal anxieties and once again achieve "normality" (151).

Perhaps this is why, as she slowly punches holes in this image, she poses the question, "And what gives me the right, from my refugee's disjointed, neurotic, desperate and disabled perspective, to judge a world which is freely setting up its norms, its norms of its normality?" (150). Her criticism of her Western hosts is accompanied by a sense of guilt because in exile she has recovered the academic privileges that she has irrevocably lost in Croatia; in her words, she has become a "privileged refugee" (25). But she nevertheless notices that the "norms of normality" to which she pays homage depend on classifying her as a Yugoslav refugee whose perspective is appropriately skewed, disjointed and desperate. She becomes a mascot of both Balkan and more broadly, Eastern European "otherness" which can be securely streamlined into the host society and help reinforce its superior position. Ugrešić reflects on the "Parisians talking about the yugomafia and Londoners about 'ustashas' and 'chetniks,' the fear of civilized Europe"; "Ha-ha, you're a dangerous lot, down there . . ." they tell her (28). The images of the Balkans that she sees in the Western media—"desperate, wretched, disheveled people with wild eyes"—only serve to strengthen the "myth of the wild Balkans" (110).

Ugrešić also challenges Western portrayals of Eastern Europe as a monolithic entity; in a similar way that she is locked in the image of a wretched refugee from the Balkans, she feels classified as a victim of Eastern European "Iron-Curtain" communism, a veritable "homo sacer" whose only acceptable position can be that of victimhood. "As soon as I crossed the border," Ugrešić says, "the customs officers of culture began roughly sticking identity labels on me: *communism, Eastern Europe, censorship, repression, Iron Curtain, nationalism* (Serb or Croat?)—the very labels from which I had succeeded in protecting my writing in my own country" (139). The humorous scene in which an American journalist, trying to express her sympathy for Ugrešić, condescendingly recycles America's demonization of communism ("'I know it was terrible,' she said emotionally, screwing up her face") helps Ugrešić expose the preconceived notions about Eastern Europe which only seek to reaffirm themselves (139). Of course, the irony that Ugrešić tries to point out to her readers is that her communist Yugoslavia was never part of the "Iron Curtain."

This renders Ugrešić's portrayal of Yugoslav intellectuals in the West all the more grotesque: revising personal histories, they deliberately play into Western stereotypes of repression behind the "Iron Curtain" in order to reap benefits from the system. A Yugoslav journalist who engages in what Rey Chow calls "coercive mimicry," or mimicry of a predetermined ethnic "identity," proudly informs Ugrešić, "I'll sell garbage from the communist store-room . . . I'll give them the expected picture of the world, stereotypes about life behind 'the iron curtain,' stereotypes about grey [sic], alienated Eastern Europe standing in line for sour cabbage" (67). Ugrešić importantly questions the ethics of reinforcing one's peripheral status, but also hints that in order for a periphery writer/journalist to enter the Western mainstream, he/she is under pressure to conform to the expected image of the periphery. Thus, when Ugrešić observes, "But we never stood in line for sour cabbage," it is clear that within the dominant discourse on the West-East divide, Ugrešić's insight might not be readily "marketable" (67). Instead, she must play into the logic of global identity politics that insists of understanding her position via the pre-determined image of "being" Croatian, Balkan and/or Eastern European.

As a challenge to such a logic, rather than engaging—like Žižek—in a politics of blaming "bad" or praising "good" ethnic (id)entities in the Balkan wars, Ugrešić focuses on the process of self-differentiation itself, implying that

every side is similarly caught up in it. Simultaneously, she resurrects a different, less "marketable" story of the subaltern Yugoslavs who do not live up to the myth of wild Balkans, ethnic hatreds or clear national identifications. These are the people she left in former Yugoslavia, who did not have the privilege of going "global" or of infiltrating themselves into Western metropolises. Such people, she hints, are historically paralyzed by the entrenched Orientalist discourses on the Balkans and Eastern Europe, which can dismiss their individual war tragedies as consequences of "expected" nationalist escapades in the wake of a post-communist chaos which do not happen in the civilized West.

The peripheral subaltern gains a voice in Ugrešić's narrative in the guise of her mother's insistent phone calls from Croatia, recounting the latest horrors but also revealing humorous, idiosyncratic exchanges between mother and daughter. Ugrešić also includes letters from her friends scattered all over the former Yugoslavia, people who mainly want to survive and evade the war; such subaltern actions of survival, as Pheng Cheah would say, "cannot easily be romanticized or recuperated as hybrid resistance" (302). H. from Croatia writes to Ugrešić about the miserable living conditions and a surreal political metamorphosis ("Our new state is like a fairy tale . . . A good fairy came, waved a magic wand and turned us into—Europeans") and also inquires after a mutual friend from Serbia, the official "enemy" territory (90). In turn, in a letter from Serbia, J. laments not being able to visit her friends in "enemy" Croatia; she denounces nationalist warmongers who chased home the people "demanding not to be divided into sheepfolds according to nationality" (94). Personalizing the "other" effectively disturbs the discourse that seeks to reduce the "other" to stereotypes. Ugrešić's narrative, in fact, performs the spectral unity of former Yugoslavia, not in terms of "official" communist politics, but in terms of its "unofficial" sense of solidarity and friendship collapsing nationalist boundaries.

This method also gives Ugrešić's narrative a polyphonic quality, enhanced by her need to consider every experience through a "double exposure." "I see everything in double exposures," Ugrešić says to her shrink, "I look at the American flag and suddenly I seem to see little red sickles and hammers instead of white stars . . . I walk down Fifth Avenue and suddenly see the buildings falling like card houses . . . Everything is mixed up in my head, everything exists simultaneously, nothing has just one meaning any more, nothing is firm any longer" (55). By situating the Yugoslav experience in the United States, Ugrešić gives the Balkan nationalist conflicts the global relevance which they have been denied by the discourse of globalization, a discourse that depends on associating Balkan nationalism with a "lack" of civilization, progress, democracy.[15] Ugrešić's diasporic experience resembles what Radhakrishnan calls a "ghostly location, where the political unreality of one's present home is to be surpassed only by the ontological reality of one's place of origin" (175). In the United States, Ugrešić supplements the unreality of her present condition by invoking the ghostly remnants of her vanishing country. Indeed, she anxiously reconstructs the country that she constantly warns is vanishing, both through its own self-destruction and its increasingly peripheral status in global relations. She enumerates memories of vanishing places, customs,

[15] Reading *Have a Nice Day* after September 11 brings this point home. As Ugresic desperately tries to make the shrink understand her story, she hints that the war in Yugoslavia may become a global virus: "But what about the virus? What if at this moment, while the two of us are talking, the Empire State Building is collapsing! And you tell me that everything'll be all right!" "You know yourself that it's impossible!" replies the shrink (56).

experiences; she lists the names of people who have already been classified as "disappeared."

The attempt to salvage the memory of a country doomed to extinction is also a reassertion of its past against its civil-war present and against its proclaimed goal of a bright future in the European Union and the prestigious "free world" society. Although she has no illusions about communism, Ugrešić mocks Croatia's hasty readiness to reject everything "Yugo-communist." What takes place politically in independent Croatia is portrayed as an emancipation from the "prison of nations," but Ugrešić unmasks it as an attempt, rather, to further one's cultural specificity in the context of global identity politics and gain national legitimacy among eminent Western powers (234–35). The entire propaganda of the country which hatched out of the Yugoslav conflict, Ugrešić implies, is directed towards shedding the image of the "backwards" Balkans and proving that its national identity is not only separate and well-defined, but also modern, democratic and beneficial to the West: "we are not beasts thirsty for blood like our enemies" the television images say (236). In the process, monuments to scientist Nikola Tesla and writer Ivo Andric become

replaced by a monument to German Foreign Minister Genscher, who championed an international acceptance of Croatia's independence (235). Croatia's already peripheral status, it seems, is further exacerbated, paradoxically, by the country's enthusiastic denial of its cultural heritage—which it shares with other Yugoslavs—in its desire to get closer to the elusive West.

Ugrešić draws parallels between the present process of Croatia's "Westernization" and the past exposure to Western values and commodities within the communist Yugoslavia. In a chapter appropriately titled "Yugo-Americana," Ugrešić explains how the American dream arrived in post-World War II Yugoslavia through "Truman's eggs, milk and cheddar cheese," through translations of Kerouac and Ginsburg and most importantly, through Hollywood (106). According to Ugrešić, this permeation of the Yugoslav milieu with American cultural products launched Yugoslavs into a collective American dream, but also created among them a sense of equality in the global world. Because they could identify with common human concerns of American soap opera characters, Ugrešić concludes, her American friend "Norman's mother in Detroit and my mother in Zagreb were in that sense equal inhabitants of the global village" (109). With that in mind, Ugrešić mentions a story by Croatian author Pavle Pavlicic, in which he compares ordinary life in Hannibal on the Mississippi and Vukovar on the Danube, casting the American and Croatian towns as equal actors in parallel worlds. But to Ugrešić, this "sameness of various worlds" has been destroyed by the reality of the civil war in Croatia, when Vukovar was razed to the ground (110). This metaphoric realization of material inequality brings to light the precariousness of equality simulated by a mutual consumption of cultural products. This conclusion also seems to be a warning that present Croatian attempts to become "Westernized " may bring them into the sphere of Western- like market consumption, but not into the sphere of material equality with the West.

Even the "television equality" is not what it seemed to be, Ugrešić realizes, as her exilic experience provides her a glimpse into ways in which Western media strengthen the Balkan myth, which only widens the gap of inequality. It is paradoxical then, that, while the media expect Yugoslavs to live up to the Balkan myth, in the civil war itself, people continue to live out the American myth: "Croatian soldiers wear bands round their foreheads like Sylvester Stallone, the town of Knin is known as Knin Peaks and the Serbian paramilitary groups are Kninjas" (111). Ugrešić thus concludes, "The world had evidently become a global village. Perhaps it had become a global American village, but we needn't go into that here" (108). The implication of Ugrešić's discussion is that, although Sylvester Stallone, ninjas and "wild-eyed" Croatian and Serbian fighters represent symbols of equally brutal violence, violence embodied by the American myth seems palatable while the one embodied by the Balkan myth is clearly unacceptable and appropriately "othered." In this light, Croatia's present anxiety to escape the Balkan myth and embrace the West only gives credence to this problematic distinction. Throughout the essays, embracing the West means participating in a consumer mentality, ideology that adjusts anything into a perfectly marketable commodity. In that sense, not only is Ugrešić, as a "representative of a postcommunist country," expected to "sell" a story about her experience to the Western market,[16] but Croatia's war horrors themselves have to live up to "marketable" standards: "If the war horrors in Croatia had been presented by an international fashion designer, someone would have noticed them" (139, 24).

To challenge the dichotomies according to which the West "rescues" the East from the nightmare of chauvinist nationalism into a tolerant multiculturalism, or from the nightmare of communism into liberal-democratic capitalism, Ugrešić compares the United States and Yugoslavia/Croatia in terms of a shared ideological heritage. Ugrešić finds a Western ideology of mass production and marketing of not only goods but human behavior as stultifying as Eastern European communist ideologies, and in the case of

[16] According to Martha Kuhlman, "A Danish critic vehemently reproached Ugresic in 1993 for *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, misreading the work as an offensive satire of the war. The critic accused her of engaging in a crass form of literary escapism when she actually had other pressing concerns like the 'bloody war' raging at home" (679). Kuhlman adds that Ugresic is often expected by Western interviewers to act as the spokesperson for her country, although, as Ugresic says "the Yugoslav writer has traditionally not been called upon to be the voice of the people and never really wanted that role" (679).

former Yugoslavia, populist nationalism. In this sense, Ugrešić compares seemingly disparate societies on an equal footing, highlighting the flaws in what she perceives as their mainstream value systems and subverting the superior West/inferior East dichotomy. Thus, when one of her American students asks her if she thinks that kitsch is a typical product of communist systems, she is able to reply, albeit timidly, "Kitsch is a global phenomenon" (170). Both communist and nationalist empires of kitsch, with their superficial, maudlin symbols of "brotherhood and unity" or national costumes and folklore come to resemble American television kitsch which advertises certain models of behavior, a "new American sensibility, undisguised sentimentality, a new, 'better quality' attitude to life" (181). Continuing to see everything in double exposures, Ugrešić ponders on the American anxiety to overcome depression ("strong personality") and project an image of happiness; the "aggressive synopsis of American happiness" promoted in films, soap operas and commercials recalls to Ugrešić the images of Eastern European "totalitarian happiness, images of parades, happy masses acting as a collective body" (73, 74). Her subsequent epiphany sounds paradoxical and exaggerated, but effectively highlights the common characteristics of the two worlds: "America has imposed the dictatorship of happiness" (74).

Ugrešić does not ultimately opt for any of these discourses—both the discourse of globalization and the Croatian nationalist discourse (on its way to global Westernization) seek to streamline behavior into "acceptable" models. In Croatia, Ugrešić's writing is expected to be "Croatian," while in the West, Ugrešić's writing is expected to be "ethnic," i.e., "Balkan" or "Eastern European." This double bind gives credence to Benedict Anderson's critique of what we call global cosmopolitanism: in his view, "diasporic," "transnational" identity is "at bottom, simply an extension of a census-style, identitarian conception of ethnicity." To borrow Anderson's phrase, wherever Ugrešić "happens to end up," she remains a "countable" Croatian (131). This tendency to focus on Ugrešić's ethnic identity, in Croatia, or ethnic stereotype, abroad, has indeed graced numerous writings about her work. In 1992, Croatian magazine *Globus* published an attack on Ugrešić and a number of other Croatian authors for attending a conference in Rio de Janeiro instead of helping the national cause. The article declared that the authors had "serious problems with their own ethnical [sic], ethical, human, intellectual and political identity" (qtd. in Stef Jansen 87). The authors' ethnic identity took precedence over the analysis of any (other) aspects of their texts.

In a parallel example from Western academia, Ugrešić's physical appearance as a symbol of an ethnic stereotype found its way into Ellen Spitz's conclusion to an article about Ugrešić's work. Echoing Ugrešić's description of the "wild-eyed" Balkans in American media, Ellen Spitz writes, "The stranger's hair is unruly, her facial skin creased with worry, her motley garb unkempt. Perhaps she needs just a warm smile" (153). Spitz admits that the "stranger" has made her feel uncomfortable, acknowledging her own tendency to fear the "other": Ugrešić appeared to her as "the demonic Mr Hyde, or that horrifying portrait of Dorian Gray" (154). Importantly, in Spitz's article, Ugrešić's Orientalist image nevertheless becomes a necessary appendage to an analysis of her writing.[17]

[17] Some western writing about Zizek takes a similar approach, especially in semi-academic, semi-popular magazines such as *The New Yorker*, for instance. Discussions of Zizek's philosophy are often not only overtly sensationalist (Zizek "transgresses" the limits of acceptable academic discourse or outrages audiences with "radical" statements) but also accompanied by a reference to his exotically bearded, bearish and blue-jeaned appearance.

Ugrešić's strategy in *Have a Nice Day*, therefore, is to avoid any clear ethnic categorization. She refers to herself as a "dissident" whether talking about her experiences in the United States, Holland, Croatia, or communist Yugoslavia. At the same time, her attempt to reconstruct the Yugoslavia that is being dismembered in a civil war is the project of redeeming the relevance of the past in the context of the present: the wars do not affect only "Moslems," or "Croats," or "Serbs," but also the people who would not be streamlined into "sheepfolds" of nationality, whose politics is assumed to be dead and thus becomes marginalized, both through local and global interventions.