

Nicholas Grosso,

*Author:* Dubravka Ugrešić

The books of Dubravka Ugrešić walk the line between essay and fiction and have been translated into over twenty languages. *Fox* explores the power and limitations of storytelling woven together with the emblematic reference and folkloric symbol of the ever-elusive fox. In 2016 she was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

*The greatest intimacy (or maybe the most striking prose) in Fox, I found, appears not in the dialogues the narrator has with various individuals with whom she crosses paths, not even with the lover she finds in the small Croatian village, but instead in what might elsewhere be read as encyclopedic entries, the telling, framing, and recounting of histories, whether of figures that loom large in our imaginations like Vladimir Nabokov, are nearly forgotten (like Boris Pilnyak and Doivber Levin), or are otherwise unknown (like the former judge turned de-miner). This stands in stark contrast with the quote on your website, a brief passage on the future of literature:*

*Who knows, maybe one day there will no longer be Literature. Instead there will be literary web sites. Like those stars, still shining but long dead, the web sites will testify to the existence of past writers. There will be quotes, fragments of texts, which prove that there used to be complete texts once. Instead of readers there will be cyber space travelers who will stumble upon the websites by chance and stop for a moment to gaze at them. How they will read them? Like hieroglyphs? As we read the instructions for a dishwasher today? Or like remnants of a strange communication that meant something in the past, and was called Literature?*

*And then, from A Balancing Act in Fox*

*... Writers today no longer burden their audience with a reading, they 'perform.' The audience, whose standards for reception have been honed by television and the internet, are more and more ignorant about literature, what they want is fast, unambiguous entertainment ...*

*Do you fear that Literature is at risk because of the culture that has grown around it? Or the various new and developing mediums? How does good literature transcend time, place, and medium, if this is not too big of a question?*

My life long "marriage" to literature (I studied literature, I taught literature, I translated literature, and so on and so forth) might give me a bit of authority in answering your questions. However, things are unpredictable: a couple of decades ago who would have believed that one day we would carry the whole library with us on a small light gadget called cell phone, or iPad?! Literature is not the queen of the art as it was just a couple of decades ago. In Eastern Europe, for instance, literature represented an exit light, it offered a consoling feeling of freedom, truth, inner emancipation... Literature lost its importance the moment it became a product like any other product. Powerful book industry and a powerful book market took over the evaluation arbitrage. Evaluation arbitrage had been for ages in the hands of university literary departments, "boring" academia, teachers of literature, scholars, dusty national canons built by (white) male participants, critics and others. Within the development of book industry, but also technology, the old system of evaluation was replaced by a more porous, "democratic" one. It often seems that readers took over and that publishing industry is just blindly following the tastes of readers, trying to satisfy diversities in age, color, traditions, geography, and so forth. Zillions of books for zillions of readers. It seems that not even publishers represent a valid value filter anymore, besides anybody can self-publish a book thanks to the new technological devices

and be a one-man show: a writer, an editor, an agent, a critic, a publicity manager. Anybody can build his/ her own fan base, introduce new evaluation rules... Literature is not anymore in the hands of traditional "authorities." More than that, it seems that industry and market are "forcing" the remaining traditional authorities to reflect upon the new books, new trends, new authors and give their evaluative blessing. As a result, we have enormous book production, but we don't have diverse literary schools any more, or trends, or articulated literary periods (the last one was postmodernism), we don't have literary struggles, or polemics, we don't have literary fights between "old" and "new," "mainstream" and "experimental," "good" and "bad." The only thing we have is unstoppable huge production and a (false) feeling of an absolute freedom of literary choices.

However, thanks to mostly invisible literary activists and enthusiasts, scholars, students, literary professionals and literature lovers, thanks to the existence of "people who do remember" and who mostly act from an "dissident underground," the idea and the concept of "good literature" are still alive, still survive and still manage to get promoted.

*In his review of Fox, Peter Mitchell writes: "In some sense, all these essays (or episodes, or fables, or practical jokes) can be read as attempts to engage with Ugrešić's one (wavering, provisional, frustrated) object of faith: language," which I imagine, in part, is reflecting on the agonies of war, state violence, and the many other avenues for propaganda. Again, in A Balancing Act, you write:*

*The language of journalism could be viciously cynical (dehydrated migrants!), even as it claimed the opposite. Equally confusing was the language of pundits (sociologists, historians, political scientists). That language had tagged me, as well, with categories such as hyphenated identities, hybrid selves, and so forth. That language that followed the strictures of supposed political correctness and courtesy, language that took a stand, at least declaratively, in opposition to the language of outright fascism, had only, in fact, broadened the linguistic repertoire of discrimination.*

*All of which calls to mind, A.O. Scott's review of The Image Book (direct by Jean-Luc Godard), a meditation on the history of cinema and the interaction between the artistic image, the journalistic image, and images made for popular consumption:*

*Depictions of combat and slaughter, excised from narrative or political context as they are here, also lose their moral and aesthetic bearings. The spectacles that thrill us and the documentary evidence that horrifies us are hard to tell apart. Are we looking at cruelty or heroism? Fact or fiction? Justice or barbarism? And if those distinctions collapse, what about the narrower—but to Godard, utterly vital—distinction between cinema as an art and the ubiquitous and disposable images that threaten to swallow it, and us?*

*When writing, how aware are you of the many way's words are twisted, cherry-picked, and otherwise manipulated? Is there pressure to counteract such euphemisms and linguistic indirection? And given the breadth of literary history incorporated into Fox, do you feel compelled to establish a clear context in your work? Or to place your work within a particular literary tradition?*

The writer who establishes clearly his/her context could be a manipulator as writers were and are, especially today, when it comes to "managing" their public writer's persona, or intellectual profile. They like to garland themselves with the high quality proof tags such as Nabokov-like, Joyce-like. If writers themselves do not participate in building their public persona then their publisher would do that for them. Publishers, critics, reviewers, and readers as reviewers tend to connect the new literary product to the most popular or the most visible literary names of the

moment. When it comes to women we all know: Virginia Woolf-like is out, Ferrante-like, Cusk-like, Rooney-like are in. When it comes to men: Nabokov-like is out, Knausgaard-like is in, Joyce-like is out, Murakami-like is in. I share here the details that are trivial and nobody really takes them seriously. However, does this affect the literary processes in so-called “serious” literature? It does. Every serious university literary department would employ a current literary star as a professor of creative writing or cultural studies, and every such professor would rather link him/herself to a current literary star than to an obscure writer from an obscure cultural territory. Besides, universities depend on students, and the majority of students would rather sign up for a course on a current global literary star than a course on “something incomprehensible” (“Something incomprehensible, something Slavic”—this is a wonderful comment I got myself from an anonymous reader). Things are much more complicated, of course. The examples I gave are only the most obvious and thus the most trivial detail of the huge and dynamic cultural production we deal with as producers, followers, cultural observers, facilitators and consumers. We all need new answers and new coordinates: what the hell are we all participating in?

*Let me try to squeeze in a question without so much preamble. Was the form of Fox inspired by essay films? The ones by Agnès Varda and Chris Marker came to my mind while reading, like La Pointe Courte and Sans Soliel, if not for theme than for structure. If such films did not inspire the structure, what did influence it?*

The structure of *Fox* is not inspired by essay films, or at least not directly. Essay-novels are vital part of European novelistic tradition. Let’s say that such types of novels might be more “acceptable” within the European novelistic tradition, although today European publishers would rather publish simple novels with simple stories written in a simple language.” Btw *Baba Yaga Laid An Egg*, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, and my early, little, “experimental” novel *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* have a similar structure.

*In a conversation with Costanza Sciubba Caniglia, Managing Editor of Misinformation Review and my wife, she pointed out the introduction to Hour of the Star by Clarice Lispector, which cited her “primitive power” and the blurb on the front cover that noted her “ability to write as though no one had ever written before,” this despite a line on the very first page of the novel: “Make no mistake, I only achieve simplicity with enormous effort.”*

*Here again we see language, as was mentioned earlier, fall into such familiar tropes where the non-North American/ Western European white man are turned into something like Rousseau’s noble savage. This conversation felt like a perfect complement to the “dyslexia” described in Fox:*

*The specific “dyslexia” that readers—men and women alike—show when reading literary texts, each for his or her own reasons, has made this conquest impossible. In short, most “girls” still write romance novels, while notes from underground are reserved for “boys”; the rebellious confession is a male literary narrative because the rebel is invariably a man, he is our tragic hero. The story of a tragic heroine is read—with the “dyslexia” I mentioned—as the tale of a “madwoman.”*

*How do you navigate, counter, or lean into and subvert such categorizations? Is there a difference in your approach to such language in your everyday life and in your writing?*

It is difficult to navigate against the categorizations of today's global cultural market united and strengthened by digital media. Every market, including cultural ones, unites its consumers thanks to strategies of standardization. All big global chains offer exactly what their consumers expect. People like McDonalds because with McDonalds they feel "at home" anywhere in the whole world. With McDonalds they get exactly what they are expecting to get. No surprises, whether you are in North America, Europe, or Asia. Why do people like Starbucks? Exactly for the same reason: in Amsterdam's Starbucks you feel like you are in New York's Starbucks: the same choice of coffee. Big industries and media work on the standardization of the public taste. In literature we'll immediately think of genres, like detective novels, or romances, or vampire novels, or YA literature. However, so-called serious literature is not immune and market does everything to incorporate serious literature into a mainstream, to make patterns of non-mainstream literature more acceptable, to suck them into mainstream, to standardize them in order to sell them.

*With the many traumas that come with living in exile, on top of the troubles of living in the contemporary moment, the narrator identifies cities as her confidant, counselor, and mirror:*

*I saw myself reflected in cities as in a mirror. Using the cityscape—as if it were a gas meter—I gauged my condition. I held my inner map up to the city map. Taking the city's pulse, I took my own. The maps of the subways and undergrounds I compared to my own circulatory system. Others had psychoanalysts, I had cities.*

*This follows a similar pattern to the narrator's relationship with language. And along those lines, the two do often act in similar ways, even if only metaphorically: cities organize and articulate our ways of interacting and habits, as language organizes and articulates our perceptions and feelings. Walter Benjamin wrote in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:*

*Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception—or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit.*

*How have you seen cities as aiding and hindering your work as a writer? In this period of climate crisis, has your relationship with cities changed?*

I have two novels that are placed in the cities. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is placed in Berlin and *The Ministry of Pain* in Amsterdam. Both towns are not chosen randomly, they are not just a place. Towns in my novels play a role of parallel text. Some towns are not just places but they are a "cultural texts," a cultural palimpsest. Cities are like novels, with millions of interconnected characters, plots, stories, and histories. My novels talk to the places I've chosen, Berlin and Amsterdam. The town is a metaphor, a symbol, a living character, a parallel plot, a secret interlocutor... If you take a town as a text, not just a topography which could be replaced by any other topography, then the novel becomes a complicated and enriching relationship between two texts, the existing one and a newly created one.

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