

# MEMORY AS FORTIFICATION

MARINA WARNER speaks to DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ



Photography by Renée de Groot

We live in an overwhelming present. Our identities are as fractious and fluid as the multi-device, multi-tab newsfeed that now provides our primary access point to reality. Metaphors, fables and myths have more power than ever and the collective atmosphere is marked by despair and disintegration. Few are better equipped to serve as a guide to this time of stupefying chaos and simplistic solutions than Dubravka Ugrešić. Renowned for her acerbic wit and unflinching critical approach, Ugrešić’s essays and novels are shaped by her exile from the former Yugoslavia, a condition that required her, she has said, to undertake a “voluntary job of deconstructing the established values of human life”. In conversation with Ugrešić is novelist, critic and cultural historian Marina Warner, who shares with Ugrešić a concern with history and the multiple forms of truth-telling.

**Marina Warner** I have always been struck by your extraordinary powers of observation, as is everyone who reads you likewise. You’re especially good at noticing how mass media, digital media, alter the actual fabric of everyday life. How did that affect the former Yugoslavia? I mean, is it very Americanised?

**Dubravka Ugrešić** I wrote about it in my essay “Yugo-Americana”. American culture occupied the consciousness, imagination and the tastes of Yugoslav consumers very early on. Esther Williams, with her swimmer’s legs shut the door to a potentially dangerous visitor – socialist realism. In 1953, her film *Bathing Beauty* played in Yugoslav cinemas and from then on Yugoslav cinemas were flooded with Hollywood movies. Do you know the story, or the legend, about how Ernst Lubitsch’s brilliant comedy *Ninotchka*<sup>†</sup> was shown in Italy at the suggestion of the US State Department? *Ninotchka* is said to have sabotaged the results of the 1948 Italian general election, when there was a big chance that the Communists would win. Well, they didn’t.

Ugrešić’s numerous books include *The Ministry of Pain* (2005), *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2009), *Fox* (2018) and the forthcoming essay collection *The Age of Skin* (2019).

Warner is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Birkbeck, a fellow of the British Academy and President of the Royal Society of Literature. Her books include *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media* (2004), *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and The Arabian Nights* (2011) and *Forms of Enchantment: Writings on Art & Artists* (2018).



+ Greta Garbo played the titular role in *Ninotchka* (1939), a Soviet envoy seduced by the West while on assignment in Paris. The film depicted Stalin’s Soviet Union as a dreary place to live.



“Money has no nationality, only people do, and generally speaking those are people who have nothing else.”

—Baba Yaga Laid an Egg (2007)

**MW** You have a great interest in cinema when you're talking about your youth, and of course there was an aspect of freedom that was expressed in American culture.

**DU** Yugoslavia, like other countries in Europe after the Second World War, was in ruins, suffering hunger and poverty. I used the margins of my mother's books as my first drawing pads. Yugoslavia was expelled from the family of communist countries in 1948, but Yugoslavia was rewarded for its choice of a “third way”. We, at least my generation, were not fed hard ideology, but soft and seductive products: I remember Cheddar cheese, powdered milk and Hollywood movies from my earliest childhood. You rightly mention an “aspect of freedom that was expressed in American culture”. I realised that much, much later. Let us take a feminist point of view and mention old Hollywood movies and stars like Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis, Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Marlene Dietrich, Barbara Stanwyck, Lauren Bacall, Ava Gardner, Carole Lombard and many others. In today's movie industry, we would not be able to find such a diversity of female figures, such interesting plots and such emancipated women characters. Going with my mother to the cinema in my early childhood – because there were no other attractions for children at that time, not even dolls – gave me much more than I am able to articulate.

**MW** What one catches from this kind of memory is that this was a happier time; your work now is marked by a kind of melancholia. When you're translated, the word melancholy isn't actually used, but one of your translators uses the word “sullen”, which is a sort of sadness. But your sadness is more ironic; it's combative, it's resistant. I don't know if this will put your hackles up, but I remember that Milan Kundera has a kind of essay on *litost*, a Czech word for a kind of melancholy, known for being untranslatable.

**DU** The writing of the greatest eastern European or central European authors like Bohumil Hrabal, Milan Kundera, György Konrád contained that specific melancholy, specific love or empathy towards human beings and their weaknesses and mistakes. *Litost* is a deep understanding of human inadequacy. Hrabal was the greatest master of that sort of compassion. Although I would like to have it, I don't have that kind of empathy in my essays. In fiction, yes, but in essays I behave like a person who would like revenge. I behave like I'm hiding a mighty sword behind my back, but in reality I have back problems and can't lift the sword properly. Something like that.

**MW** Your essays – in their bite, in their clandestine sword flourishing – are closer to the idea, I think, and I hope it may appeal to you, of the devilish fool, the bitter fool, like the fool in *King Lear*. The fool sees the follies and mistakes of the world, and rails because he would like things to be different. There's a hope that things could be different, but he sees again and again that it isn't.

**DU** There is a story about Yevgeny Zamyatin, the author of the great dystopian novel *We*<sup>†</sup>. Zamyatin was a western European-oriented author. He worked in England for a while, as a ship engineer. When he returned to the Soviet Union, he wrote a letter to Stalin asking to be let go. Zamyatin was one of the rare writers to get a passport to go to Paris. He lived in Paris and after only

a couple of years died of a heart attack. In his letter to Stalin, he wrote that “true literature can exist only where it is created not by diligent and trustworthy functionaries, but by madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers, rebels and sceptics”. The idea that the author is a madman is incorporated into the history of literature, and in literature itself.

**MW** Shakespeare says, “This fellow is wise enough to play the fool.” They are the *porte-paroles*, the spokespersons, for truth, truthfulness.

**DU** Figures like the *originale*, in Italian, and *yurodivy*, the holy fool in Russian, persist in many cultures of the world. People are ready to spit on them, to beat them, to be brutal to them. But they're respected at the same time<sup>‡</sup>. Sometimes it's a religious figure – starting with Jesus Christ himself – or a comedian, or a holy fool, or a great literary character like Myshkin, from *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. They tell the truth, but nobody really takes them seriously. You are right, there is something foolish in the very need to tell the truth. Truth-tellers are socially stigmatised: if the truth-teller is a man, he is a “loser”; if it is a woman, she is a “witch”<sup>§</sup>. I am too much a writer, that's why I can't serve as a *porte-parole* for truth. As a writer I am trying to find different procedures and also different kinds of truth. Writing essays is more about finding my way in the world, how to orient myself in a world full of ambiguous signs, how to palpate the pulse of our contemporary time. I know, of course, such a task is tremendously ambitious. I operate with metaphors that can bring a shot of truth. Metaphors are constructions. They are not truth themselves; they are little constructs that help us to pinpoint a certain truth that should shake and disturb the reader. In the core of the essayistic genre lies the heresy, as Theodor Adorno believed.

**MW** Another component of your sense of distance and distaste, and at the same time, attraction lies in the whole area of *nostalgia*, nostalgia, and you've written a lot about it, and very richly. It seems to me to divide into two parts. There is a political *nostalgia*, of which you have been accused. It's been said that you are hankering for the old Soviet, or even pre-Tito, world, and so forth. But then there is a genuine sense of loss in your work for the world of folklore and proverbs, the world of ordinary, unauthored stories. You use a lot of marvellous quotations from this kind of material. That is something that is being, as it were, thinned out by the current global culture. So those are two aspects of nostalgia in your work: the political argument about the past, and the uses of true antiquarian research, of going back into cultural memory.

**DU** Nostalgia is a tricky, capricious thing. It appears and disappears. Sometimes it works, sometimes it refuses to work. There is also *Ostalgie*, a term coined by Germans after the fall of the wall [to describe a wistful recollection of Communist East Germany]. It seems that both sides got the symptoms, *Ossies*, but, paradoxically, *Wessies* too. Thirty years ago, I wrote an essay called “The Confiscation of Memory”, because I was deeply aware that with the regime change, some collective memory was going to be confiscated by the winners. Yugo-nostalgia is a term coined by Croatian people in power and by the media. It was a serious political accusation: people suffering from Yugo-nostalgia can't forget Yugoslav



‡ In his book *The Way of Tarot* (2004), Chilean-French artist and film-maker Alejandro Jodorowsky describes the symbolic role of The Fool – the first card in the Tarot deck – as one of “infinite beginnings”.

§ On 10 December 1992, *Globus*, the Croatian tabloid weekly, ran the headline “*Hrvatske feministice siluju Hrvatsku!*” [Croatia's Feminists Rape Croatia!] and targeted Ugrešić along with four other prominent female intellectuals, labelling the women Zagreb's “witches”. Full of defamatory information, the article received worldwide attention.



† The first British edition of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, published in 1970 by Jonathan Cape. Zamyatin's novel describes a dystopian state where bureaucratic rationality has eroded all personal freedoms. George Orwell began writing *1984* eight months after he read a French translation of *We* in 1946, lifting much of his plot, the outlines of three central characters and his concluding twist from the book.



+ The “Stone Flower” monument, built on the former site of Jasenovac concentration camp, serves as a reminder of the atrocities perpetrated at the camp. It was designed by Bogdan Bogdanović and unveiled by the Yugoslav government in 1966.

⊕ The Ustashe was a Croatian ultranationalist organisation active from 1929 to 1945. It operated as a terrorist group prior to the Second World War, but after the Axis powers invaded in 1941, it was appointed to rule a portion of Yugoslavia as the Independent State of Croatia. The organisation was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews, Serbs and Roma.

“Retouching is our favourite artistic device. Each of us is a curator in his own museum ... Uncover A, cover up B. Remove all spots. Keep your mouth shut. Think of your tongue as a weapon. Think one thing and say another. Use orotund expressions to obfuscate your intentions. Hide what you believe. Believe what you hide.”  
– *The Ministry of Pain* (2004)

“brotherhood and unity”, “communism”, “Tito” and simply can’t adapt to new political changes. If you were raised in the system – like I was – where some of the basic ideological values were anti-fascism, but also anti-Stalinism, self-management, equality, free passports, a “third way”, cosmopolitanism, and the Non-Aligned Movement, then it is difficult to accept new values such as chauvinism, ethnic hatred, false-memory syndrome, collective nationalistic hysteria, false history, official re-establishment in Croatia of Nazi puppet-state symbols such as money, language, flags, coats of arms, discrimination against Croatian citizens who were ethnic Serbs, and so on. The same political menu was on offer in Serbia – one nationalism provokes another. Nobody was wise enough or powerful enough to avoid or to stop it. I don’t feel any nostalgia. I feel total disappointment with the people. Young Croats today do not believe that Jasenovac<sup>+</sup> was a major [Croatian-established] concentration camp where over 80,000 Jews, Serbs and Roma were exterminated [between 1941 and 1945]. It feels like all our memory cards were forcefully deleted and filled with new content. Many young people do not mind swastikas popping out like popcorn; they find the Croatian version of Hitler’s *Sieg Heil* acceptable. Many of them find the political dominance of the Croatian Catholic church positive. Politicians, right-oriented, supported the destigmatisation of the Ustashe movement. Don’t forget that Ustashe<sup>⊕</sup> culture and literature have been recently reintroduced at Zagreb University’s faculty of arts as legitimate studies. The purpose of such studies is in tune with the state policy of historical revisionism. They want to canonise figures, politicians, writers and ideas that normal people are ashamed of.

**MW** You tell a terrifying story of Ante Gotovina [former colonel in the Croatian Army and convicted war criminal]. He was found guilty of crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), but was hailed in Croatia as a military hero, and was released after an appeal. Why was he acquitted? How did he get off?

**DU** Gotovina was one of the leaders [of the Croatian Army during the Croatian War of Independence]. So the story goes, in 1995, at the height of the war, he led a military campaign called Operation Storm, which brought victory for Croatia but unleashed a three-month ethnic-cleansing campaign to drive out Serbs [from the disputed territory]. Since he had served in the French Foreign Legion and trained paramilitary organisations in South America, when he enlisted in the Croatian National Guard, at the beginning of the war, he rose quickly in the ranks to become a general. Under Gotovina’s leadership, in the wake of Operation Storm, around 200,000 Serbs were expelled to Serbia. Dozens of totally innocent people, including the elderly and children, were killed during the operation – their houses were plundered and burned.

**MW** And this was really very recent.

**DU** This was in 1995. It was another six years before the ICTY issued a warrant for his arrest, and he evaded capture for another four. [The European Union made it a condition

It feels like all our memory cards were forcefully deleted and filled with new content. Many young people do not mind swastikas popping out like popcorn; they find the Croatian version of Hitler’s *Sieg Heil* acceptable.





† Ante Gotovina is widely lauded as a national hero in Croatia. A quick Google Image search reveals a profusion of fan-made tributes.

of entry to the European Union that Croatia release him to the international courts.] It wasn't until 2005 that he was caught and brought to the Hague tribunal. After a delayed trial, he was found guilty of war crimes, and condemned to 24 years in prison. But then, after an appeal a couple of months later, he was released, and came home to Croatia a hero<sup>†</sup>. Now he is a businessman. He bought a chunk of sea to start a tuna business. He sells tuna to the Japanese now. His fans, and there are a lot of them, built him a villa on the Adriatic coast. Today he's presented as a "peacemaker". He is an absolute Croatian icon. On the walls of the Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb there is a huge graffiti saying: "Happy Birthday, General". It's been there for a couple of years. Nobody dares to touch it.

**MW** In the world of literature, we're used to the idea – or we *were* used to the idea – of writers being open-eyed and not colluding. We're accustomed to that idea. But this has broken down, hasn't it? You went into exile before this shift, at an earlier stage of Croatian nationalism, but presumably there is now an intellectual class in Croatia that is complicit. I mean, you're unusual for being a dissident intellectual from Zagreb.

**DU** I realised that the deepest fear which most of humankind suffers from is the fear of exclusion. We all need to belong, to family, to God, to ethnicity, to race, to class, to homeland, to country, to a gang. All traumas, it seems, come from one source: belonging and exclusion. Even in a kindergarten kids fear being excluded. And you can be excluded for who knows what reason, you could have different skin, or be fat, or have a stutter. For the sake of feeling safe, many people will give up their individual identity. And that's what's frightening. All the situations in history show you that more or less people adapt to the situation. However, there are situations when some people can't cross the line. I couldn't bear illiterate, primitive, criminal minds setting their stupid rules on me, telling me who I am, how I should think and behave, threatening me and my family. I couldn't accept this – but a majority of people did, because a majority of people always do.

**MW** You were forced into exile. I'm very interested in how you have formulated the idea that as you no longer belong in the place where you were born and brought up, nor in Amsterdam, then you are now a "transnational". In *Nobody's Home*, you write, "Ever since I left home, the whole world has become my home."

**DU** First of all, I didn't have the time to think. I left impulsively. I was not a famous physicist, a valuable profession that is needed anywhere. I learned on the way that there was not much I could plan. I just tried to save myself from drowning in self-pity and helplessness. Nabokov said somewhere that the passport doesn't make a writer. What matters is literature, that's what probably saved me. Pompous words. In reality, things were not so pompous. I am bearing the consequences of my refusal to belong. What I have learned is: literature is not only an emancipatory choice, a space of freedom; it is also one of the most rigid and conservative of cultural spaces. It's like football. Can you say without hesitation that football is just a game?

"Trauma is sometimes greatest where there is least cause; anti-communist hysteria proved most vehement where communism itself had been most benign."  
—*Europe in Sepia* (2013)

**MW** Do you think literature is more conservative than art?

**DU** Art today is a part of the global market. Who sets the aesthetic values? Do people recognise the difference between fake and authentic art? Literature is connected with language, and language is a part of the package of national identity. Consequently, language is a political matter. That idea brought Serbs, Croats and Bosnians – who share the same language, but not the same state any more – to use shameful strategies in defending their "identity". These strategies include the cleansing of non-Croatian books and authors from Croatian libraries, cases of book-burnings, expelling many writers from school curricula, and so on and so forth. Cultural vandalism – which includes devastation of well-known monuments, buildings that represent Yugoslav architectural modernism, and grotesque language theories and practices in Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin – goes unnoticed. Nobody cares for Lilliputian new states, but the states themselves do. Hysterical care for yourself can lead you into a narcissism and finally into self-destructiveness. That's exactly what's happening with most post-Yugoslav states. You don't have to be an expert, just go to Croatia and visit the newly erected monuments to Franjo Tuđman<sup>‡</sup> and other defenders of Croatian independence. Go and visit Skopje, a town you can't walk through because of all the new monuments that honour the glory of Macedonian history – there are more monuments than citizens in Skopje – you will learn immediately what national madness and hysteria is.

**MW** Your work as a fiction writer has explored the fluidity of the self; you write in different voices. In your early work, you created many different kinds of personae. You were interested in masks, and even titled one of your collections, *Lend Me Your Character*. The polymorphousness of identity goes against what you were saying about people being categorised as a Bulgarian writer or a Chinese writer. We're all expected to be very consistent all the way through. Whereas a lot of writing, like Proust, is about the extraordinary complexity and contradictions of a single person. And the possibility of many, many selves.

**DU** I respect all writers and their different styles, because I know how harsh, risky, fragile, deeply humiliating and deeply rewarding our "status" can be. I prefer playfulness in literature. It is difficult for me to take seriously writers with no sense of humour, for instance. I prefer writers who fight and break the stereotypes, even if they use stereotypes as their weapons. I prefer skills and knowledge. A writer could be a genius, but if all of their books are the same, I might get bored. The majority of people want exactly that, though. A friend of mine explained to me why he likes McDonald's: because they are all standardised, and he feels as comfortable in them as he does at home. He gets what he expects to get. There are no surprises!

**MW** When you write your essays, do you act as a reliable witness? Or do you invent things in your essays?

**DU** Sometimes I invent details just to make the story fuller and funnier, or easier to swallow. I also sometimes exaggerate a bit just to hit a point, all for the sake of good literature. Essays belong to literature, not to investigative journalism, which would



‡ Franjo Tuđman was elected as the first president of Croatia after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1990, ruling for nine years. In 1995, he authorised the Operation Storm offensive.

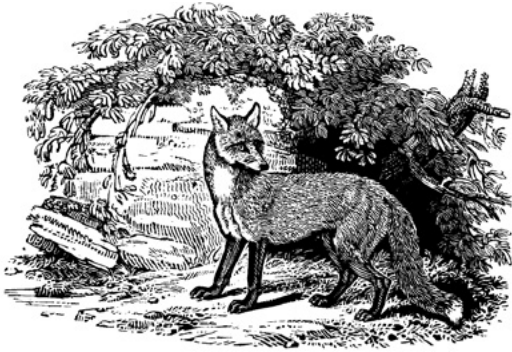
oblige me to tell the truth. Essays might reveal another quality of truth.

**MW** This is the proverbial truth-telling of animal fables, the most ancient form of literature, which you very much draw on. Truth-telling in a totally fantastic form, in Iran, India, Greece. You quote this wonderful proverbial exchange: “Hey there, you eagle, you,” says the worm. “Salutations, oh King of Snakes,” replies the chicken. Your inspired, touching, comic novel, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, is also rich in folklore.

**DU** I adore fairy tales, like you! You managed to revitalise and reanimate that ancient form of literature and to reinstall it into a package for the modern reader. That was a huge project and I do the same on a much, much smaller scale. In my new book of essays, *The Age of Skin*, I use quotes from fairy tales from Kosovo and Metohija. I also use a quote from Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, one of the best Croatian fairy-tale writers, and, I would say, the only. I exploited motives from fairy tales in my early collection of short stories *Life Is a Fairy Tale*, as well as in *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*.

**MW** And you also take these stereotypical figures from fairy tales and you have a lot of fun transforming them. I mean, they're still quite powerful and wicked, but we, the readers, are invited to care for them.

**DU** Yes, which I do. We should all be witches; the world would be better. In my most recent novel, *Fox*, I use the figure of the fox, which is deeply rooted in European literary heritage through Aesop's fables, fairy tales and early medieval European novels. The fox also belongs to east European heritage, mostly as a *she*, a female, a vixen. The further east we go – Japan, Korea, China – the fox becomes exclusively female and enriched with many more meanings. My novel is not about that fox. Instead, I am taking it as a writer's totem or writer's soul. The fox serves as a consistent metaphor that connects different chapters. Much later, I bumped into an essay by Isaiah Berlin called “The Hedgehog and the Fox”<sup>†</sup>, where Berlin uses the fox and the hedgehog as metaphors for the differences in writers' creative temperaments. Let me get back to fairy tales. One of the ways to look at the world is through the oldest possible lenses: through myths and fairy tales. Myths and fairy tales are sort of the blueprint. We compare the new structure, whatever it is, with an old blueprint. Sometimes this comparison can lead us right to the epicentre. For instance, I never read *Sleeping Beauty* through the lens of contemporaneity until recently, when I saw the documentary *Life Overtakes Me*. Thanks to the movie I learned about “resignation syndrome”, which is also called traumatic withdrawal syndrome or traumatic refusal. The description of the syndrome is based on some 400 cases in Sweden after the year 2000. It is a culture-bound syndrome, found among child and adolescent refugees and asylum seekers who are waiting for their status to be resolved and who could easily be deported. Children show symptoms of apathy and lethargy, they refuse food, and bit by bit they move into a catatonic state. In other words, they become “sleeping beauties”. Their parents take care of them, feed them through tubes, in order to keep them alive. Such a condition can last months



† In “The Hedgehog and the Fox” (1953), Isaiah Berlin proposes that there are two kinds of thinker: hedgehogs, who view the world through a single committed viewpoint; and foxes, who constantly draw upon multiple perspectives.

or even years. Recently, they found cases of resignation syndrome among children on a tiny Australian island which serves as a camp for asylum seekers. I also recently learned that the same condition was first noticed in Nazi concentration camps, but was not identified and named. It reminds me of an observation by Nadezhda Mandelstam in her memoir *Hope Against Hope*, that many people during the Stalinist purges used to “go horizontal”, to go to bed and lie down all day.

**MW** Yes, I read about this phenomenon in the *New Yorker*: it is extraordinary, a powerful and tragic example of the body responding to the mind, to feelings of despair and disorientation. But to go back to you, you mention Mandelstam's memorable book and I am reminded that you were first a scholar of the Russian avant-garde. Is that right?

**DU** Yes, I became interested in the Russian avant-garde when it was still undiscovered and semi-prohibited. Boris Pilnyak<sup>‡</sup> was executed in 1938 during Stalin's purges. He was rehabilitated after Stalin's death, but it took at least 20 years for his first modest volume of fiction to appear. Thanks to literary enthusiasts and Cold War strategies, many avant-garde writers were published in specialist publishing houses in France, Germany and the USA. I was probably among the first scholars in the world to rediscover forgotten writers like Konstantin Vaginov and Leonid Dobychin, though I never considered myself a true scholar. Neither was my ambition to become a “literary detective”, although I can't think of a better job.

**MW** Do you think that the concept of an avant-garde has any value or meaning any more? I mean, there was an avant-garde in the past, but is it possible to have one now? What would it be?

**DU** The Russian avant-garde is our literary legacy, like modernism. Historically, it was one of the most radical ways of thinking, producing totally new concepts, theories and cultural practices in art, music, film, design and literature. The Russian avant-garde didn't fall from the skies; it arrived with revolution, with political changes, with new discoveries. That's why it can't be resurrected. Only the cheap symbols of the Russian avant-garde could be commercially resurrected, and that is what the cultural market does. You can buy a cup with a Joyce quote or a T-shirt with a Malevich painting – but you can also buy T-shirts with Stalin's portraits and quotes. The market is immoral; it tends to level all values, to standardise, to play a cynical game of democratisation. The avant-garde was all about subversion and sabotage. What can you subvert in times of democracy? We live in digital times. Everybody in the world has a tool to express themselves, to send a message and be heard.

**MW** One of the things that makes me feel very old now is that I feel quite out of tune with a lot of women writers who write about their sex lives. First of all, I don't think this writing is of the same interest as the plurality of the self. But the market loves this material.

**DU** A friend of mine said: “Time overtook me, but I don't feel any pain.”

**MW** I know, but I have many young friends, younger women than me, who are supposedly dissident and feminist who think that Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* is a masterpiece.



‡ Boris Pilnyak's novel *The Naked Year* (1922) was one of the first examples of experimental Russian literature. After rising to literary stardom, he was persecuted for the alleged anti-state messaging of his work by the Russian Association for Proletariat Writers. In 1938, at the height of the Great Purge, a murderous campaign of political oppression by the Soviet state, he was falsely accused of being a Japanese spy and plotting to kill Stalin. He was found guilty, and executed on the day of his trial.

“The ideology of sincerity ... has been elevated to an essential value of our time and it is now headed towards becoming a moral aesthetic, and even a social, norm.”  
– *Nobody's Home* (2005)



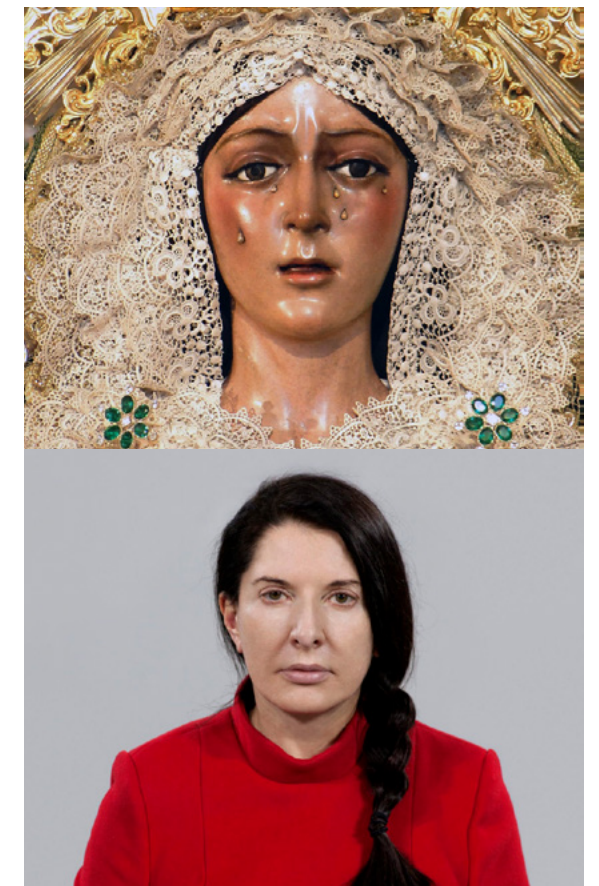
**Women live in discontinuity, because they were never able to build their canon, to show respect to the history of women's writing and their achievements. As their culture is not based on agglomeration, but constant self-colonisation, they always start from zero.**

**DU** A bunch of the same novels are appearing in the Netherlands, Germany, Croatia, Russia, and so forth. This is the most conservative aspect of women's writing. In expressing themselves, many women writers think that their identity is only sexuality. Sometimes I think this is all about biology, the way women behave in culture. Every ten years, as far as I remember, we have the same problems. It reminds me of the children's game "two steps forward, three steps back". Only big cultures cherish the concept of continuity. That's why they are big. Small cultures, like Croatian or Serbian, treat culture as a symbol of their identity. They would switch their cultural values because of political demands in a moment. Culture in such small, unstable environments is accidental. Croatian author Miroslav Krleža is an accident; Ivo Andrić is an accident.

It's the same story with women and literature. Men mentally address their work to other men. True, they often dedicate their work to women, but their imagined addressee is always another man. Women mostly address their work to men; other women are not their imagined addressees. Women live in discontinuity, because they were never able to build their canon, to show respect to the history of women's writing and their achievements. As their culture is not based on agglomeration, but constant self-colonisation, they always start from zero. That's why literature written by women is predominantly about sexual, gender and lately racial identity. Women imagine men as their interlocutors. They know how to attract their attention, mostly by staying within the stereotype men have about women and women have about themselves. That's why I was sort of fascinated by *The Artist Is Present*, Marina Abramović's performance at MoMA. Abramović, as a woman artist, has waited for a long time to be canonised. In spite of her international fame, it didn't happen, which is why, I guess, she decided to take the job of self-canonisation – or self-beatification – into her own hands. She played the Virgin Mary for three months, intuitively hoping that through this ancient religious stereotype she might be canonised as a woman. We go to church; we sit in front of the Virgin Mary. She is silent. From time to time she sheds a tear. We project into her our prayers and hopes; she peers into our souls. She, the Virgin Mary, a woman artist, is right in front of us! She is present!<sup>†</sup> Over and over again women pass through the same pattern of victimisation and victimhood, self-hurt and self-humiliation, sex and body issues – as if the body serves no other purpose than sex – and in the process some of them manage to get beatified. Literary works written by women resemble a big confessional space: it could be a church, it could be a psychotherapist's office, it could be a group therapy session for those suffering from "I'm a woman" disorder. Is that space empowering, emancipatory, or simply immature? I don't dare say. It seems that a new, redefined chick-lit has taken over. No wonder, taking into account that we live in a time where grannies look like girls, and little girls like big girls.

**MW** The feminism of my generation believes that women should be larger than their bodies. We had different bodies and we had been

"There is, presumably, something in the very nature of shit that makes it so loooooooved. And however much the theoreticians of popular culture try to explain why shit ought to be loved, the most attractive aspect of shit is nevertheless its availability. Shit is accessible to everyone, shit is what unites us, we can stumble across shit at every moment, step in it, slip on it, shit follows us wherever we go, shit waits patiently on our doorstep. So who wouldn't love it! And love alone is the magic formula that can transform shit into gold."  
–*Thank You for Not Reading* (2016)



<sup>†</sup> From 14 March to 31 May 2010, Marina Abramović staged *The Artist is Present* at MoMA, a piece lasting 736 hours and 30 minutes, in which she sat immobile and unresponsive while spectators took turns to sit opposite her.

“Small talk ... is a gift of everyday life and is given freely. Small talk lifts the spirits. We are not alone in the world, nor are we lost.”  
—*Nobody’s Home* (2005)



† In 2017, a group of NGOs and linguists presented a Declaration on the Common Language, contending that Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian are versions of one “polycentric” language.

shackled by those bodies by a lack of medical innovation – we died in childbirth and so forth – but our feminism would mean that our lives would be larger. There seems to be a retreat from that now.

**DU** Women should be young and beautiful, and stay young and beautiful. Full stop. Most of the people in the world support this concept: priests, men, politicians, media, the entertainment industry, the serious cultural industry, the cosmetic industry and, sadly, women themselves. The whole world lives to the rule: “Be young and beautiful and stay young and beautiful.”

**MW** What languages are you reading in? Because you have a very wide range of references. Are you still reading Russian?

**DU** No, I rarely pick anything in Russian these days. Like everybody else, I am a weak human creature; I live in an “extreme present” and I am sometimes so overburdened by cheap and senseless information that there is no mental place for quiet and passionate reading.

**MW** One of the things that strikes me about your oeuvre is how you must be performing a remarkable historical role in the development of the language you use, which used to be called Serbo-Croatian. Your writing in English is very rich in vocabulary and sentence structure, and I imagine the translators are capturing that from your own writing. When the regime changes, which we hope it will, perhaps it will become apparent that you have performed a real role, one that used to be a very strong linguistic role of the writer. Dante made Tuscan; Chaucer made English, and Shakespeare, of course, continued the job; Manzoni created modern Italian. Have you read any comments of that kind on your work?

**DU** I can’t remember reading anything substantial. There are still wars among linguists over whether it is the same language, or four independent languages: Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian and Montenegrin<sup>†</sup>. States insist on the concept of independent and separate languages, understandably, and guess whose version is accepted as official? In reality, things are different: most young people try to learn English and to leave their little, angry and nasty homelands. Life is elsewhere.

**MW** Tell me about your titles. They’re so good.

**DU** I am sensitive to titles. In 1994, I published a book whose original title was *Američki fikcionar* or *American Fictionary*, but the UK and US editors decided that the title should represent the topicality of my texts rather than their poetic side. So originally, the book appeared under the title: *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream*. Last year, my American publisher reissued the book under what should have been its original title: *American Fictionary*. However, sometimes the worst titles, like Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, become the best ones. My new book is called *The Age of Skin*. It’s a collection of essays I wrote between 2014 and 2018, all wrapped into a metaphor of skin and body. A body, a skin, is one of the major values of our culture. *The Age of Skin* is an “umbrella” title, but also the title of the first essay in the collection. For that essay I was inspired by reading *Lenin’s Embalmers* [by Ilya Zabarsky and Samuel Hutchinson], a book about the special institute in Moscow famous for inventing

very efficient embalming methods. Its first masterpiece was Lenin’s corpse<sup>‡</sup>.

**MW** He’s still there in Moscow...

**DU** You’re right. He’s the only one who is still there. Many others, like Stalin, for instance, were buried or cremated. Lenin is the only one who remains. The institute survived, too. It repositioned itself and today is the most exclusive undertakers in Moscow. The Russian mafia is its best client. Apparently, the Russian mafia also counts on a bit of eternity.

**MW** I’ll tell you a very macabre thing I came across in Italy. My sister and I rented a little villa on the sea, and on the hill going down to the sea from our villa was a conventional village cemetery. At the top of the cemetery, there were new graves, and it was clear from the tombstones that these had been excavated and then reburied. In Italy, they bury you and then, after a few years, when your bones have disintegrated, they put you in a columbarium – those buildings with small slots for your remains – because that way you take up less space. We found a nun who was looking after the graveyard and we asked her, “Why have they been reburied?” And she said, “Because they haven’t rotted yet. We expected them to have rotted, but nobody rots anymore because of all the injections they do. All the hormone injections stop people rotting, so they have to be reburied.” Incredible.

**DU** There is a relatively new procedure in dealing with corpses called resomation, which is available in several US states. Resomation experts put the body into a tank resembling a washing machine, and the body dissolves like an Alka-Seltzer. What happens to the soul, whether the soul is hydrophobic or water-resistant, nobody knows, not even theologians, although they should, because 70% of our bodies, they say, consist of water. I am not religious but in this body-dominated world, I often miss a concept of the soul. The soul is light, portable, invisible, transportable, a little thing with wings. It might be indissoluble, too. ☺



‡ Upon Lenin’s death, his body was embalmed by Vladimir Vorobiov, an anatomist from Kharkov, while his brain was put aside to be studied for proof of his superior intellect.