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# Dubravka Ugrešić.

## The Writer and Deterritorialized Literature

Maciej Duda

I dream that one day I shall remove the stickers that other people have assiduously attached to me and become just my name. Because that, just a name, is the greatest literary recognition that any writer can earn. For everyone else: Cyprus, five points, Poland, two points, Belgium, ten points...<sup>1</sup>

Dubravka Ugrešić wrote the declaration quoted above in 1999. Polish readers encountered it in 2004, thanks to Dorota Jovanka Ćirić's translation. The author of *Thank You For Not Reading* wrote those words after eight years traveling back and forth between Europe and the United States. Her journey began with political emigration, departing from a country that soon thereafter ceased to exist.

<sup>1</sup> D. Ugrešić, "The Writer in Exile." KITCH, Institute for art production and research, Ljubljana, 2007-2010. <http://www.kitch.si/livingonaborder/files/Dubravka%20Ugresic%20-%20The%20Writer%20in%20Exile.pdf>. Last accessed November 6, 2015.

The quotation reveals a common theme in most of Ugrešić's writings – an urge to compare herself with others, to test how she is classified among writers and in the literary marketplace.<sup>2</sup> Officially, Ugrešić is angry with the rules governing the market, and wishes to be free of them, to exist beyond them. Paradoxically, however, every text she writes concerning the condition of writer/artist and readers/audience is inscribed in that system, taking up a position assigned by others, whether publishers, readers, or critics. Thus this motif of checking and comparing her place, though uncomfortable and despite her efforts to distance herself from it by constantly making ironic allusions to the problem, becomes deeply internalized and impossible to get rid of. The desire for and even the declaration of unclassifiability, are not sufficient to transport her beyond the workings of literary market forces. Ugrešić dreams of her geographic displacement becoming linked to processes of national and political liberation, empowerment, emancipation, and renewed subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the system of market forces does not allow her full, autonomous resolution.

In examining the tension between the author's own and external market classification procedures, as well as comparative literature and other literary approaches, I would like to determine how Ugrešić's prose and essayistic writings have changed or are continuing to change as well as attempt to answer the question, whether the practice she dreams about, of rejecting national labels and being a writer who is "between," "beyond," "trans," is really possible? Does the idea of transcultural writing or authors exist in reality? To this end, I will contemplate the self-definition that Ugrešić has inscribed in her works and the reading matter that served as the inspiration for texts by the author of *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream*. A chronological view of her published works illuminates preoccupations that seem to fit with the designs for the theoretical project of transnational literature. The practice of such a project is given its fullest treatment in her essay "Karaoke Culture."

## Song of Myself

"Yes, I'm Balkan," I sighed, resigned.<sup>4</sup>

"I don't know who I am any more, or where I'm from, or where I belong," said my mother once [...] when someone asks me who I am I repeat my mother's words: "I don't know who I am any more..." [...] Sometimes I say: "I am a post-Yugoslav, a Gypsy."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The conception of culture and literature developed by Ugrešić takes into account the perspective of artist, receiver, and publisher. Their interests (in the sense of "self-interest") and expectations cannot fully coincide, however.

<sup>3</sup> The term I have in mind is precisely *empowerment* [in English in the original—T.W.]. "The word can be understood in many ways, and is used with many different intended meanings. The concept appears in the social sciences (for example in battling discrimination, in social work, in psychiatry) and in management. This concept is also closely linked with feminism and emancipatory pedagogy. *Empowerment* refers, furthermore, to both the process of becoming empowered and its result. It designates a change at the individual and structural levels.

In its sociological sense, *empowerment* refers above all to members of minority groups, subject to discrimination and marginalization, excluded from decision-making processes, opportunities to influence outcomes, or wielding power, broadly understood (at the personal, familial, societal, or national level, among others)." Definition by Agata Teutsch, <http://rownosc.info/dictionary/empowerment/>, last accessed 27.07.2015. The website also features a list of publications on this subject.

<sup>4</sup> D. Ugrešić, *The Culture of Lies*, University Park Pennsylvania 1998, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

These declarations of Ugrešić's bring to mind a *matryoshka* doll. When we open up the first one, we find a smaller copy of it inside. The categories that the author designates in this series of essays are contained within each other or belong within her previous forms of self-definition, often imposed upon her from the outside. Yugoslavian women and Roma women are simultaneously Balkan hybrids. Likewise, being a Croatian woman will, for her, become a mere fragment of post-Yugoslavian and Balkan identity. All of these categories are impermanent for Ugrešić. Aware of a certain compulsion to do so, she tries them on, in order to become part of the globalized book market. Ugrešić knows perfectly well that market mechanisms demand she define herself in terms of nationality not in spite, but because of globalization. Earlier, politics made a similar demand on her. It is not by chance that one of her most important books bears the title *The Culture of Lies. Antipolitical Essays*. In her later work, Ugrešić deals with the identification experience of the Yugoslavian republics' coexistence and the consequences of their later political division. In view of those consequences, she chooses the particle "trans" to express her identity in place of any unequivocal nationality. Aside from her dream of avoiding labels and tags, she is perfectly well aware that a mere surname is insufficient. A surname, after all, does not offer the possibility of escape. The record of that name denounces her, and refers to a particular language and cultural region, which will restrict her work's meaning, potential, and most importantly, reading public. For that reason also, her name appears on different editions of her work in different iterations and variants. One difference consists in the presence or omission of diacritical marks: Ugrešić vs. Ugresic.<sup>6</sup>

"Only once did I see the word *transnational* in parentheses after the name of a writer, and I immediately envied him,"<sup>7</sup> Ugrešić writes. The writer does not wish to be in a particular place, but rather in between or outside places. Helena Duć-Fajfer writes that this desire "can eliminate the ambivalence that is often the share of people under the influences of divergent values and models. [Through being in between—M.D.] one achieves bivalence, the acceptance of one's own many-layered identification and free participation in a variety of national cultures, leading toward one's own creative synthesis of diverse cultural elements."<sup>8</sup> Duć-Fajfer highlights the term "in between," while Ugrešić uses the category "outside." The difference would appear to be located within the problem of influence. "In between" suggests a compulsion to choose, while "outside" indicates the possibility of rejecting that choice in favor of self-reliance and empowerment.

In one essay Ugrešić states that a whole range of literature is still unfairly and improperly defined with the labels "refugee," "ethnic," "migrant," "emigré," and "diaspora."<sup>9</sup> The reason for this is supposed to be the fact that descriptive language cannot keep up with quickly changing

<sup>6</sup> In keeping with Polish reception of the writer, this essay uses the same version as most published translations of Dubravka Ugrešić's books into Polish. Of the 12 books published under her name in Poland since 2000, only three used the spelling "Dubravka Ugresic." Those are, in chronological order, *Baba Jaga zniosła jajo* (2004), *Forsowanie powieści rzeki* (2005), and *Kultura kłamstwa. Eseje antypolityczne* (2006). All were released by the same publisher, Czarne. [Translator's Note: Among English translations, *Baba Yaga Laid An Egg*, *Nobody's Home*, and *Karaoke Culture* notably feature the author's name sans diacritical marks. T.W.]

<sup>7</sup> D. Ugrešić, *Thank You For Not Reading*, trans. C. Hawkesworth, Dalkey Archive Press 2003, p. 140.

<sup>8</sup> H. Duć-Fajfer, "Etniczność a literatura" (Ethnicity vs. Literature) in *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy* (Cultural Theory of Literature. Central Concepts and Problems), ed. M.P. Markowski and R. Nycz, Kraków 2006, p. 443.

<sup>9</sup> D. Ugrešić, *Nobody Home*, Open Letter Books 2008, p. 149.

reality. She herself, relying on the work of American academics, recognizes the term transnational as applying to her own work. Inspired by the thought of Azad Sehan, she characterizes transnational literature as follows:

I understand transnational literature as a genre of writing that operates outside the national canon, addresses issues facing deterritorialized cultures, and speaks for those in what I call “paranational” communities and alliances. These are communities that exist within national borders or alongside the citizens of the host country but remain culturally or linguistically distanced from them and, in some cases, are estranged from both the home and the host country.”<sup>10</sup>

Ugrešić does not, however, describe or analyze this simultaneous, twofold distance from the motherland and the country of exile. She does not reconstruct the system of concepts and influences affecting such artists, nor does she focus on the poetics of the transnational work. To find practical solutions to the problems defined by Ugrešić, then, we must consult her own texts. For in fact she indicates herself to be a prime example of a practitioner who functions or seeks to function outside national canons and touches on themes that are important to deterritorialized cultures.

## Territory

Ramazani’s concept of influence and drawing on suitable models relates to a range of problems beyond the need for self-definition. Above all, it is concerned with determining the shape and sources of the texts created by the writers we study. Ugrešić, as a literary scholar, engaged in the analysis of prose works by Russian authors. Her readings found theoretical support in studies by theorists hailing from or living in both Eastern and Western Europe. This does not, however, mean that Ugrešić’s work made it possible for two separate cultures with different reading and writing practices to meet in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Community, understood as the possibility of influence or drawing from an example, and fashions (also in a way resulting in what we would now call glocal activity, or that we could define, following Bhabha, as the practice of mimicry<sup>11</sup>) have been demarcated by the transnational, transgeographical cultural categories of modernism and postmodernism. The difference between influence and appropriation can be expressed by the distinction enunciated by Andrzej Hejmej between the traditional comparative approach to literature based on “national philology” (national literature) and the “comparative cultural studies approach, which in the second half of the twentieth century and particularly in recent decades has been attempting to break with the study of influence (‘arcades’<sup>12</sup>), with factual links [...], which questions the idea of comparison, highlighting instead the phenomenon of (in)comparability, which often contents itself with fortuitous juxtapositions or, in Spivak’s words, ‘affiliations.’”<sup>13</sup> It is precisely the

<sup>10</sup> A. Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation*, Princeton University Press 2001, quoted in D. Ugrešić, *Nobody’s Home*, p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> Compare with Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October*, Vol. 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984), pp. 125-133.

<sup>12</sup> “Arcade interests me thus not in the Benjaminian, but in the van Tieghemian sense, that is, as the transfer of a given literature beyond its proper language borders (or rather, cultural borders), in the paradigm of influence studies.” See A. Hejmej, *Komparatystyka. Studia literackie – studia kulturowe* (Comparative Studies. Literary Studies and Cultural Studies), Kraków 2013, p. 291.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292. In the quoted passage the author refers to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Rethinking Comparativism” in *New Literary History*, Volume 40, Number 3, Summer 2009, pp. 609-626.

reflex of appropriation rather than influence that becomes the primary mechanism in building Ugrešić's first short stories. A selection of them appeared in Polish translations in the 2004 volume *Baba Jaga zniosła jajo* (*Baba Yaga Laid An Egg*). The publisher and translator took those texts from two previous books of short stories by Ugrešić: *Poza za prozu* (*Posing for Prose*, 1978) and *Život je bajka* (*Life Is a Fairy Tale*, 1983). Ugrešić's earlier stories are fixed within an interpretation that at first glance appears to advance the category of the postmodernist intertext.<sup>14</sup> Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało has written that "this is a bold exploitation of literary history for her own frivolous use,"<sup>15</sup> because Ugrešić by means of various references to and intertexts from Russian literature shows off her background and erudition in literary scholarship. The category of postmodernism has in fact become the main obstacle to the reception of these texts,

The concept had penetrated into my native literary environment from haphazardly translated foreign articles. For the local critics, postmodernism was something like gossip from a distant literary world, and so instead of adopting the concept itself they adopted *gossip* about it. Using my own Author's Notes as the only relevant source, critics concluded that this collection was a typical "postmodern construct," which at the time was merely a polite phrase for plagiarism.<sup>16</sup>

Ugrešić sums up in her "Author's Notes" to the Belgrade edition *Život je bajka* issued in 2001. The quoted commentary also appears in the Polish version, where it is amplified by an additional translator's note. Hamkało, writing of the "frivolous use" of literature, is simultaneously right and wrong, because the frivolousness she observes becomes manifest in a discussion of a book in terms of its erotic potential. The pattern (attributed to postmodernism) of using literature, intertextuality or borrowed characters does not itself, however, merely serve the purpose of literary games and amusement in Ugrešić's work. Instead, it thematizes the very lack she diagnoses. In her polemic with the critics, Ugrešić precisely states her motivation for writing: "Leafing through my native literature, I discovered to my astonishment that the only writers who spontaneously touch on erotic themes are children's writers. So I bravely took on the task of cultivating a new literary genre."<sup>17</sup> Here, the postmodern idiom of game-playing is replaced by a gesture of reproof for the absence of something, and Ugrešić functionalizes the very gesture of borrowing a character or copying a passage from a well-known text as a criticism of literary reality. She thus prioritizes ethical categories, and privileges the interpreting

<sup>14</sup>In Croatian literary scholarship, the category of postmodernism has had a complicated history, having been subjected to two major influences, fashion and politics. Julian Kornhauser describes its evolution in "Kategorija postmodernizma w literaturoznawstwie chorwackim" (The Category of Postmodernism in Croatian Literary Studies), in *Kultury słowiańskie. Między postkomunizmem a postmodernizmem* (Slavic Cultures. Between Post-Communism and Postmodernism), ed. M. Dąbrowskiej-Partyki, Kraków 2009. Magdalena Dyras goes so far as to diagnose a case of literary-historical abuse. She demonstrates that the category of postmodernism appeared in Croatian literary discussions in the mid-1980s. Dyras writes: "the ennobling aspect of postmodernism's early presence in Croatian culture exerts influence on the interpretation of the entire phenomenon. I think that it has often led to typical overinterpretations and in some cases the attribution of a postmodern pedigree to entities which in fact have a particular, specifically Croatian nature." See *Re-inkarnacje narodu. Chorwackie narracje tożsamościowe w latach dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku* (Re-incarnation of the Nation. Croatian Identity Narratives in the 1990s), Kraków 2009, pp. 138-142.

<sup>15</sup>A. Wolny-Hamkało, *Baba Jaga zniosła jajo*, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75517,2419044.html>, last accessed: 18.07.2015

<sup>16</sup>D. Ugrešić, "De l'horrible danger de la lecture (Author's Notes)," in *Lend Me Your Character*, trans. C. Hawkesworth, London 2005, pp. 232-233.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 233-234.

subject and his or her individual reading practices over the object of study.<sup>18</sup> Readers get acquainted with the “ingredients... mixed in the literary saucepan” one at a time.<sup>19</sup> We thus are able to confirm our hunch that “A Hot Dog in a Warm Bun” references Gogol’s “The Nose” – it is in fact “an attempt to turn psychoanalytical-interpretative gossip about Gogol’s “The Nose” into literature,”<sup>20</sup> while other texts contain allusions to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (in her discussion of “Who Am I?” Ugrešić states that “20% of the text is taken from that book”<sup>21</sup>) as well as works by Robert Musil (*The Man Without Qualities*), Daniela Charmsa (“The Old Woman”), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (*Crime and Punishment*), Leo Tolstoy (*The Kreutzer Sonata*, *Anna Karenina*) and Jorge Luis Borges. Tropes from such works enter into Ugrešić’s work in the form of a borrowed sentence, the inscription of a longer passage, the placement therein of a borrowed character or the permeation of an atmosphere recalling the writings of one of these authors. As such, Ugrešić reiterates, this is not supposed to be an ordinary game of “Lend Me Your Character,” but to express themes that Ugrešić does not find in the work of her local colleagues.

Another important trope in Ugrešić’s early texts is the sex of her characters. A female protagonist is often a figure that Ugrešić has resolved to rehabilitate by introducing her into literature and literary life as a thinking subject. Her collection of stories thus becomes an accusation against the existing reality of that time:

That is to say, in the literary scene the men respect each other, polemicize with each other, test and measure themselves against each other, enthuse about each other, pat each other on the back [...]. They do not quote women writers, even famous foreign women [...] but they always refer to famous foreign men. Men are everywhere.<sup>22</sup>

Curiously, the accusation put forward in these notes does not have an equivalent in the author’s fiction, where, even when borrowing female characters, she draws from works written by men, and does not refer to or quote from works by famous foreign women.<sup>23</sup>

The technique presented above, in which Ugrešić illustrates problems of the local literary scene by using literary devices typical of the transnational category of postmodernism, connotes a vision of culture that postulates the transparency of references, awareness of their sources and original versions, and knowledge of the author’s immediate context of contemporary local literary life. Ugrešić thus binds together the universal and the local.

A survey of Ugrešić’s later essays and feuilletons reveals her familiarity with journalistic and scholarly writings whose authors sought to study the intersection of the categories of nationality,

<sup>18</sup> This is how Hejmej describes the “instability of comparativism,” which leads to its reformulation. See A. Hejmej, *Komparatystyka. Studia literackie – studia kulturowe*, pp. 72-78.

<sup>19</sup> Ugrešić, “De l’horrible danger de la lecture,” p. 235.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>23</sup> For more on this topic, see M. Duda, “Biblioteka Dubravki Ugrešić” (The Library of Dubravka Ugrešić), a paper I read at the conference *Czytanie... Kobieta, biblioteka, literatura* (Reading... Woman, Library, Literature) in Szczecin on 23-24 April 2015, Uniwersytet Szczeciński. A printed version is scheduled to appear toward the end of 2015.

origins, and the resulting dependent factors that shape the image of the representatives of a particular language and culture. This inclination can be linked to her biography and the political emigration mentioned earlier. Among the authors she cites are Milan Kundera, Nikolai Gogol, Il'ya Ilf, Evgenii Petrov, Ivo Andrić, Miroslav Krleža, Czesław Miłosz, and, later, Slavoj Žižek, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, Jean Baudillard, Umberto Eco, and Arjun Appadurai. Both of these groups constitute functional, significant paths for Ugrešić. They do not represent a place from which she reads, but rather a state of being<sup>24</sup> or a need that she meets by writing about those authors. The first group stands for longing and even melancholy; it connotes the reflexive examination of one's own interior landscape. The second group can be associated with the process of movement and change, looking at oneself from the outside, at a distance. The first row of names appears in Ugrešić's post-emigration narratives, where they are used by her as ironic figures vis-a-vis the external gaze of the Western reader attempting to pin down her work, to find an unambiguous classification for it.

## Genre

Further reading of essays by the author of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* reveals Ugrešić's library to be a collection organized not by nationality or the authors and protagonists' sex, but by genre. It is not the name on a book's cover, the sex or background of the author that drives her choices as a reader. Those factors are relevant for her, but not front and center. The key to her choices and classifications becomes form. This is demonstrated perfectly by *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream*, a record of her process of getting to know and interpret American culture. In Ugrešić's choices of words and definitions to make up this imaginary dictionary, form is a privileged category. She looks through manuals, instructions, guides, and organizers, whose interpretative and explanatory function is not of primary importance to the emigrée writer. What is more important, for her, is the aspect of their popularity. On its basis, Ugrešić declares a culture of the manual, the "sacred handbooks or instructions"<sup>25</sup> that construct life; that understanding of culture, it appears, later becomes the point of departure for her codification of another ordering paradigm – the idiom of *The Culture of Lies*.

The most vivid example of Ugrešić indulging this fascination of hers – reading something that enjoys transnational success and offers a simple recipe for how to arrange one's life (these aspects can be understood as causally related) – is her reading books by Paulo Coelho. Ugrešić traces the motif of her interest in the phenomenon of the Brazilian author through two collections of her writings, *Thank You For Not Reading* (2003) and *Nobody's Home* (2008). Her first presentation of Coelho (written in 1998) was prompted by the phenomenon of the bestseller as "a space of ritualized collective innocence [...] a holy marriage between the text and the readers [...] a closed system of simple values and even simpler knowledge."<sup>26</sup>

Plunging into the crowd of vacationers on the Adriatic, Ugrešić grasps at the texts she sees in the hands of other holiday-makers on the beach; "I settled on a rock and tried to match my

<sup>24</sup>"[...] cultural comparative studies [...] represent less a scholarly method or procedure than a certain position, a certain human behavior, attempting to understand another human being, a text, or a group of texts." A. Hejmej, *Komparatystyka. Studia literackie – studia kulturowe*, p. 92.

<sup>25</sup>D. Ugrešić, *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream*, Viking, 1994, p. 46.

<sup>26</sup>D. Ugrešić, *Thank You For Not Reading*, p. 62.

own reader's pulse to the global pulse of the literary mega-market. I opened Coelho's book."<sup>27</sup> In the next several sentences Ugrešić performs a deft summary of the plot of *The Valkyrie*, after which she closes the book, "gaze[s] at the sky,"<sup>28</sup> and states that her hypothesis has been confirmed. A year later, she returns to Coelho in a text entitled "Alchemy." There, she associates the category of the bestseller as a genre with the word "shit"<sup>29</sup> and links its attractiveness with 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,"<sup>30</sup> Ugrešić remarks. She returns to Coelho once more, in March 2006. This time she is interested in the figure of Coelho as a writer. Passing over his writings, but not his market success, she examines his biography. Her source of knowledge is the website promoting his personality and books. This small shift—the change of medium, from paper publication to virtual reality, will in time become constitutive for another Ugrešić model of culture. For the time being, the life of Coelho fits perfectly into a series of memoir narratives of Western celebrities that she codifies in 2006. Their main distinguishing characteristic is popularity with the reading public. Not the author's sex, behavior, or language, but their market value and sphere of influence. This aspect leads her to uncover a pattern or at least a shared feature among the most widely-read works. Coelho's biogram serves as a perfect example of the "personal memoir"—"one of the most popular genres of our age"<sup>31</sup> and simultaneously the biography of a contemporary "saint, a prophet, a writer, a missionary, a benefactor, a statesman without a state, and a global guru. Coelho is a unique example of a writer who satisfies the whole gamut of criteria: he is respected on all continents, as are all the greatest prophets, and in all the religious zones; he is a spiritual leader to the famous and the anonymous, the rich and the poor, the young and the old."<sup>32</sup> The qualification of satisfying all criteria for everyone is the decisive factor in Coelho's mounting of his throne atop the world library. With no political borders, no difficulties in translation, no roots or alienation, no differences. Beside Coelho's books stand successive narratives that "follow a religious model," "display motifs from the religious repertoire: suffering, sin, forgiveness" and enlightenment,<sup>33</sup> are conventional stories of "achieving wisdom, serenity, harmony, and self-purification."<sup>34</sup> "Literary reflection is not Coelho's strong point, but in fact, he doesn't need it to be. Mega-popular writers (as celebs, or prophets) are mega-popular precisely because they offer their readers the illusion that literature (fame or God) can happen to absolutely anyone," judges Ugrešić.

The writer's interest in the phenomenon of Paulo Coelho exemplifies the work in her book written from October 2003 to July 2005,<sup>35</sup> *Nobody's Home*. In the book, she takes a practical approach to literary genres that function "outside the national canon, addresses issues facing deterritorialized cultures, and speaks for those in [...] 'paranational' communities and

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>29</sup>An important problem we encounter in reading Ugrešić consists of the author's reflexive irritation, her discontentment or disappointment masked with irony. For more on this topic, see: M. Duda, "Biblioteka Dubravki Ugrešić."

<sup>30</sup>D. Ugrešić, *Thank You For Not Reading*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>31</sup>D. Ugrešić, *Nobody's Home*, p. 187.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

alliances.”<sup>36</sup> Such genres fit, to some extent, the definition of transnational literature. Ugrešić operates in a similar way. She chooses the form of an essay or feuilleton in the newspaper, and writes about what is important for a community not defined by language, geography, or behavior. What distinguishes it from the previous example, and what in terms of any comparison of market positions and reach becomes a burden for Ugrešić, is the presence of “the key concepts and themes of transnational culture— archiving ethnic, linguistic and national memory; dislocation and displacement; cultural shifts and translation and transplantation of culture; the narratives of remembrance, bilingualism, or multilingualism, exile, etc.”<sup>37</sup>

### All Criteria and Everybody's Criteria

“[A]mateurs create their own culture, based on borrowing, expropriation, appropriation, intervention, recycling, and remaking; they are simultaneously the creators and consumers of this culture,”<sup>38</sup> Ugrešić writes in *Karaoke Culture*, released in English in 2011 and in Polish in 2013 (the eponymous essay, included in the collection, was first published in Serbian in *Napad na minibar* [Attack on the Minibar] in 2010). *Karaoke Culture* looked at in its entirety may be seen as an attempt to describe the new cultural paradigm. According to Alan Kirby, the new culture can for the time being be labeled pseudo-modernism. Ugrešić, for her part, consistently uses the title phrase: karaoke culture.

Easily applicable to non-musical activities such as film, literature, and painting, karaoke is the most simple paradigm [...]. This *soft* term is less restrictive than those which are currently in use, such as post-postmodernism, anti-modernism, pseudo-modernism, and digi-modernism. All of these terms, including mine, are inferior to the content they try to describe. The content is new, and it's changing from one second to the next, so what we try and articulate today can disappear tomorrow, leaving no trace of its existence. We live in a liquid epoch.<sup>39</sup>

Of the subsequent chapters in the book, the most important one, for the purposes of my analysis in the context of transnational literature, deals with writing.

The belief in everyone's creative, writerly potential, of which Coelho serves as a demonstration, changes not only the shape of culture, but also the manner in which we use it. Hitherto culture was able to become a plane of discussion, the basis for a shared code, a reservoir of information. It also carried the possibility of conveying and completing writing, supplementing written works through the appearance of continuations of genres but also of plots, for example in the form of new installments of stories or other additions to them written by aficionados, known as *fan fiction*. The activities of these anonymous authors, following the pattern of borrowing characters and writing further developments and altered or alternate versions, even parodies, are nothing new. There have been unauthorized further adventures of Don Quijote, King Arthur and his knights, Sherlock Holmes, and Alice in Wonderland. The practice was based on a fixed relationship of the reader with the work and its author, which

<sup>36</sup> A. Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation*, Princeton University Press 2001, quoted in D. Ugrešić, *Nobody's Home*, p. 149.

<sup>37</sup>D. Ugrešić, *Nobody's Home*, p. 150.

<sup>38</sup>D. Ugrešić, *Karaoke Culture*, trans. D. Williams (title essay), Open Letter Books 2011, Kindle edition.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

remained the transparent foundations for additions and subtractions to the narrative. Investigating fan activity in our multimedia culture, Ugrešić, and before her, publishers, observe that the practice of writerly interventions need not have anything in common with an earlier process of *reading* the works being referenced by the creators of the new post-fan fiction.

The publishing industry has swung into action in attempts to satisfy the enormous interventionist appetites of the potential reading masses, and the latest fashion – the production of “quirk books” – is in full bloom. The publisher Quirk Classics features novels such as *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* [...] and *Android Karenina*, the authors of which use “mash-up” techniques, inserting elements of popular culture [...] into classical canonical works. The spawn of such “mash-ups” include [...] *Mansfield Park and Mummies*, *Alice in Zombieland*, and *Romeo and Juliet and Zombies*.<sup>40</sup>

Though the authors of the books listed above call them adaptations, the signs of their readers’ reception indicate a lack of knowledge of the originals. The order of dependence is here reversed; it is not *Anna Karenina* that forms the foundation, but the world of androids that is deeply familiar to the readers of these works. The title character is nothing more than a bit of variety thrown into the mix to spice things up, part of the “historical setting.”<sup>41</sup> Thus “[m]odern technology has radically altered the structure of the text [...]. The balance of power [...] has been flipped in favor of the Recipient.”<sup>42</sup> The relationship between author, work, and recipient has been reversed. It is no longer artists, critics, and authors who influence the shape of works and culture. It is the recipients or consumers who have become the haphazard builders of cultural artifacts. The field of reference is disappearing, becoming invalid. What becomes more important is the individual’s virtual, and therefore trans-territorial, initiative. In addition to individual projects, there are others in this new paradigm whose authorship is collective.

[T]he spectre of the collective novel, a communist idea, still haunts the Internet. The site *The Autobiography of Pain* invites the people of the world to write “a community driven novel.” The project initiators assure the artistically disenfranchised masses that *The Autobiography of Pain* project “belongs to everyone!” Although anyone can change whatever he or she wants, it hasn’t yet occurred to someone to change the novel’s title.<sup>43</sup>

It begs the question whether this collective project, made possible by the internet platform, does not represent the ideal, Utopian concept for constructing a transnational work. Created in the Esperanto of our time, English, it can blend all available poetic techniques. Its creators can draw from all possible cultural texts. Not constrained by influences and pressures, the work can be based on “individual interpretative practice [a practice also undergoing constant development --MD] in the field of new studies in translation, minority and ethnic studies,

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

women's studies, post-colonial studies, area studies, interdisciplinary and multimedia, etc."<sup>44</sup> The essential thing is that such collective projects offer readers, besides the possibility of being heard and leaving some trace of themselves (elements fundamental to karaoke culture according to Ugrešić, and linked by her with "narcissism, exhibitionism"<sup>45</sup>), a chance "to feel integrated in their community, to feel they belong to a culture."<sup>46</sup> She nonetheless finds the culture of karaoke – which in Japanese means literally "empty orchestra" – to be a menace: "This tectonic shift has changed the cultural landscape and wiped out many cultural species [...], transforming perception, comprehension, and taste—in fact, the entire cultural system."<sup>47</sup> The one constitutive condition for building a literary community with the prefix "trans" is thus supposed to be the rejection of nationalistic categories and simultaneous preservation of ethnic memory. The transnational author should therefore function as a sign of what it means to be "outside," one both accessible to and yet separate from his or her primary cultural and philological milieu. Perhaps this is why Ugrešić's texts are so often encrusted with untranslatable English-language interpolations, and in her bylines and footnotes we often find her location at time of writing or her place of birth demarcated by city (Amsterdam and Zagreb, respectively) rather than nation. The interchangeable use of the two written forms of her name appears is no doubt also guided by such considerations. Still, the questions of reach and literary position remain problematic.

Presenting the position of an author-reader who seeks to understand her fellow readers, Ugrešić frequently changes the paradigm of the culture she is describing. Like human identity, culture is subordinated to a series of processes through which it passes. Unlike identity, this project is not constructed out of previously existing resources, experiences, and other content. Those are pushed off the shelf and rendered invalid at the moment of Karaoke Culture's codification. Ugrešić's readings reveal her reluctance toward further systems for organizing the library. Her road as a reader began with the library structured nationally, a system which has since been deconstructed many times, to be supplemented by the systems of sex, gender, genre (like the "culture of manuals") or replaced by the political system (*The Culture of Lies*). After that, the library is transformed into one from which author and work have disappeared—the Karaoke Culture, devoid of structure or organizing principle. At this point the author of *The Ministry of Pain* takes a step backward. It is revealed that neither the medium of the Internet, nor international mass celebrity at the level of a Paulo Coelho provides a proper basis for the conferral of her dream prefix "trans." Transnationality as an object of envy and desire is thus not stripped of organizing principles, it, too, constructs a hierarchy, just a different one than does the system of nationally-based influences. Like deterritorialization, which does not involve the absence of a permanent place, or rootlessness, but rather displacement and re-shuffling of language and location. Ugrešić claims that "Franz Kafka (who lived in Prague, but wrote in German) is a symbolic literary figure of deterritorialized literature."<sup>48</sup> That example indicates that the category of "trans" need not be linked with the process of globalization, and

<sup>44</sup>A. Hejmej, *Komparatystyka. Studia literackie – studia kulturowe*, p. 92.

<sup>45</sup>D. Ugrešić, *Karaoke Culture*.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>D. Ugrešić, *Nobody's Home*, p. 149.

“the notion of Deleuze and Guattari about ‘minor literature’ could be a productive theoretical formula,” if perhaps not much more than that.<sup>49</sup> What is the substance, then, of Ugrešić’s dream for the prefix “trans,” and will it ever come true? Why, in her description of what is transnational – including such exemplars of the phenomenon as Paulo Coleho, Kim Kardashian, Elvis Presley, and Mother Teresa – and her dreams of sharing that label, does Ugrešić feel the obligation or desire to separate herself from them and take a position on the margins? Perhaps because, in spite of her distaste for repeating a gesture made by other scholars and referring to Goethe’s term “world literature,” when she uses a literary taxonomy of genres in which the bestseller is equal to the untranslatable concept of “shit,” she indirectly references that classical category. The main difference is our experience of a new, faster mode of transfer of information and goods. The templates of poetics remain unchanged. They, too, are designated by the literary-historical hierarchy. Neither do the problems they define change; only their formulation does. The category of nationality yields to that of the individual, who in turn becomes universalized. That shift will have no effect on poetics either, though it may affect authors’ feelings.

To summarize, it seems that in the case of Ugrešić’s work, in place of the prefix “trans,” the words “from outside” would make more sense, but should be applied to the writer’s condition rather than to her work. The prepositional phrase “from outside” is more appropriate to describe the place from which she observes and writes. Such a formulation could also rescue her position as one who, loath to participate in the joustings of the market, pays close attention to the profits pouring out of it. The margin, for Ugrešić, is, unlike any other place, the locus of radical opening.<sup>50</sup> Margins allow her the possibility of being “outside,” but not “beyond.” |

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., pp. 149-150.

<sup>50</sup>See bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” in *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, London 1989.

# KEYWORDS

tranculturality

*transnational  
literature*

comparative studies

## **ABSTRACT:**

Dubravka Ugrešić defines herself as a transnational writer. Her political, geographic and cultural dislocation constitute the main themes of her prose works written in the last decade of the twentieth century. In the subsequent decade, Ugrešić's essays took on additional themes relating to the European literary market. The author follows reading fashions and examines the shape and function of publications defined as European or world bestsellers. As a writer and scholar she is drawn to the concept of the transcultural, whose distinguishing characteristic she finds to be the experience of a new and faster mode of transfer of information and goods. The poetics of the work, however, will not be disturbed or changed. Similarly, the hierarchy established by the history and criticism of literature, setting the boundaries of culture and referred to with irony by Ugrešić in her reading of bestsellers, remains intact. This author-reader who seeks to understand her fellow readers often changes the paradigm she uses to describe culture. In her examination of the relations between author, work, and receiver, she delineates an emerging karaoke culture. It cannot, however, be designated as a transnational literature or culture. The literature created by Ugrešić eludes definition in a similar way. Analyses conducted in the text demonstrate that with regard to Ugrešić's work, the term "from outside" would function as a more correct label than the prefix "trans." It should be understood, however, as defining the condition of the writer more than of her work. The label "from outside" appears adequate for defining the place from which she observes and writes, not for the form of her literary output.

bestseller

# Dubravka Ugrešić

g e n r e

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Maciej Duda – PhD in the humanities, has ties to Poznań and Szczecin, coach, lecturer (among other subjects, Gender Studies at AMU, post-graduate program in Gender mainstreaming at IBL PAN [Institute of Literary Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences]). Author of the book *Polskie Bałkany. Proza postjugosłowiańska w kontekście feministycznym, genderowym i postkolonialnym. Recepcja polska* (Polish Balkans. Prose from the Former Yugoslavia in Feminist, Gender, and Post-colonial Contexts. Polish Reception, 2013), co-editor of three volumes of the report on Gender in Textbooks (2015). Awarded a scholarship from the National Center for Scholarship (Fugue 3). Currently engaged in a research project entitled *Publicystyczna i prozatorska działalność mężczyzn na rzecz polskich ruchów emancypacyjnych i feministycznych w latach 1842- 1939* (Men’s Journalistic and Prose Activity on Behalf of Polish Feminist and Emancipation Movements in the Years 1842-1939).