

Karaoke Culture. By DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ. Translated by DAVID WILLIAMS. Pp. 324. Rochester, NY: Open Letter. 2011. \$15.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9781934824573.

Cultural critic Dubravka Ugrešić's latest book is a collection of incisive and thought-provoking essays addressing issues of identity, homeland, migration, globalization, and technology. Though it is a frequently repeated combination of topics, Ugrešić manages to establish a place for herself within this dialogue by writing with personality, empathy, and a refreshingly untheoretical approach in her essays. What strikes one when reading her work is the uniqueness of her experiences; being born into former Yugoslavia, handed a Croatian passport after its collapse, then exiled from this new home after writing a controversial news article. This brings to her work not only an interesting insight into the politics of her motherland, but also a truly international and migrant perspective of one whose imaginary homelands span from America to Eastern Europe to her new home in Amsterdam.

The ten-chapter essay *Karaoke Culture*, which gives the book its title, is not, as we might expect, about the 'deaf collective caterwaul' with which the word is usually associated. Rather, Ugrešić interestingly uses the metaphor of karaoke to give form to an overly democratized culture obsessed with creating its own versions of popular television, art, and literature. One might ask what distinguishes this culture from the subversion and parody of a postmodern moustache on the Mona Lisa. Ugrešić's answer is anonymity through technology. Her heroes are not revolutionaries, but ordinary people wanting to escape the self through existing cultural models, to be 'someone else, somewhere else'. Her argument is well-supported, and she details examples of phenomena, such as karaoke writing (fan fiction) and karaoke people (lookalikes and 'fandoms'), which navigate the globe so effortlessly that the reader is instantly situated comfortably within the many cultures encountered in the book.

Ugrešić understands the power of the unexpected, especially when tackling key issues, such as homeland, migration, and identity. In the essay *The Hairdresser with the Poodle*, she muses on how one feels at home in a foreign country, and questions how far identity depends on our presence in the motherland. But what is it that unites all the places we have lived in? Perhaps the ritual of finding a new hairdresser! *No Country for Old Women* explores the peculiar nature of patriotism. What separates it from paraphilia, the love for a non-human object? It follows the same pattern as *Hairdresser* and begins with a general discussion, but then brings theory to life through carefully selected personal experiences. Ugrešić's strength lies in her ability to write of these experiences without being overly sentimental, but rather with the same humour and humility with which she writes theory.

The tricky thing about personal experiences, however, is that they can sometimes make an essay veer into memoir, which is perhaps the case in *A Question of Perspective*. It details Ugrešić's exile from Croatia due to anti-nationalist sentiments espoused in her writing. Turned into a villain overnight, we can understand a cultural critic's interest to explore the situation, but perhaps the critic should not have been Ugrešić. We see her moving from an impassioned, intelligent observer to a participant with a personal vendetta. The story itself, telling of lawsuits and media appearances across a five-year period, is interesting, but seems out of place against the tone of the other essays. Perhaps meant for another book, here one can see the narrow edge on which Ugrešić's anecdotal style balances.

I wonder if Ugrešić placed the whimsically titled section *The Cookie That Made a Frenchman Famous* immediately after this essay on purpose to restore the original tone of the book. The placement is ideal. It contains one of my favourite essays in *Karaoke Culture*, entitled *The Fly*. It is here that we truly see Ugrešić's talent for seamlessly linking ideas, and how sometimes her anecdotal style can create something wonderful. A fly that unintentionally meanders inside the plastic wrapper of a sandwich in Budapest interrupts Ugrešić months later in Warsaw, arousing an ambiguous sense of familiarity and relief. As Ugrešić travels to literary festivals all over Europe, her thoughts, and ours, are continually drawn back to the fly. We see a fly on a teacup, and marvel at the number of insects that have crept into Eastern European works of art and literature. The fly nearly ties together the peculiarities of the continent; nearly, because Ugrešić likes to keep loose ends untied, which is what is so real and alluring about her writing. The fly is not expected to carry the history

of the whole continent on its wings. Narrative is not expected to neatly conclude ideas, making experiences more significant than they are. What Ugrešić sets down in her writing are those anecdotes that elicit an intangible wave of hilarity, irony, familiarity, or thoughtfulness within the reader. It is the best kind of elicitation, as it is the ideas that we ourselves experience that we remember and believe in most strongly.

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