

Dragana Jurišić

# The Lost Country

Seeing Yugoslavia through the eyes of the  
displaced

Submitted for: PhD

University of South Wales

2013

Director of Studies: Professor Mark Durden

Supervisor: Ian Walker

This thesis was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Wales for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

## DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed .....

Date .....

## STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed .....

Date .....

## STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed .....

Date .....

## ABSTRACT

Yugoslavia fell apart in 1991. With the disappearance of the country, at least one million five hundred thousand Yugoslavs vanished, like the citizens of Atlantis, into the realm of imaginary places and people. Today, in the countries that came into being after Yugoslavia's disintegration, there is a total denial of the Yugoslav identity. My practice led research looks at the effects of exile and displacement on memory and identity.

In order to investigate such complex subjects, I needed a definite roadmap. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia (1941)* by Rebecca West, a vast inventory of the lost country, provided me with the itinerary to almost the hour. Initially intended as "a snap book" it spiralled into half a million words, a portrait, not just of Yugoslavia, but also of Europe on the brink of the Second World War, and widely regarded as one of the literary masterpieces of the 20th century.

*YU: The Lost Country* was originally conceived as a recreation of a homeland that was lost, a journey in which I would somehow draw a magical circle (I was following Roland Barthes's assertion that photography is more akin to magic than to art) around the country that was once mine and resurrect it. Instead, it was a journey of rejection, of displacement and exile that was stronger back 'home' than in the foreign place where I chose to live. Photography, contains elements such as fleetingness, which allow it to capture that sense of rootlessness and dislocation with relative ease. Both exile and photography intensify our perception of the world. In both the memory is in its underlying core. Both are characterised by melancholy.

Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: Rebecca West, <i>Black Lamb and Grey Falcon</i> : an 'exile's' journey through the exiled country .....	12
The three journeys.....	18
What happened next? .....	22
The mystery of its relative obscurity.....	30
Chapter 2: Rebecca West's Yugoslavia, Two Vagabonds and an encounter that never took place .....	34
Rebecca West's Yugoslavia .....	39
Two Vagabonds in the Balkans .....	47
An encounter that never took place .....	52
Chapter 3: Yugoslavia's violent end, an odd chain of influences and another fool in the Balkans.....	55
Yugoslavia's violent end .....	55
An odd chain of influences.....	64
Another Fool in the Balkans .....	71
Chapter 4: Dubravka Ugrešić .....	76
To Fly Alone .....	78
On Coming from Atlantis .....	82
Photography, Nostalgia's Secret Weapon.....	90
Chapter 5: YU: The Lost Country.....	97
Minstreling through Atlantis .....	104
The Exiled Artists as Oikos-Promiscuous .....	111
Conclusion .....	120

# Introduction

*Once upon a time, in a faraway part of Europe, behind seven mountains and seven rivers, there was a beautiful country called Yugoslavia.*

Slavenka Drakulić (2004)

Yugoslavia was a short-lived country in both of her<sup>1</sup> reincarnations. The name Yugoslavia was first used in 1929, then abolished fourteen years later, re-established again in 1945 as a Socialist Federation, to disintegrate once more in 1992. Both my practice and the following text are produced from the position of an exile. Now, more than twenty years after the wars started, I feel at a safe distance to recall and question my own memories of both the place and the events personally experienced.

It has always interested me why immigrants and exiles congregate around the bus and train stations of their adopted cities. They shuffle along, but go nowhere. I remember a Christmas Eve snowstorm in Vienna's bus station, more than a decade ago. The buses were running late. As I waited there for hours, I noticed a group of people who were also waiting, but they were not going anywhere. There were no bags. They were not looking at the timetables. Sometimes they would briefly chat to each other. Then I heard they were talking in the language of my old country, and I knew that for many of them, who had left Yugoslavia, there was nowhere to return to. Yugoslavia, despite its brief history, was a land of perpetual exile and ever-shifting borders. Now it's the country that is completely made out of memories.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the Serbo-Croatian language, the word Yugoslavia is of female gender.

This is why I am calling myself an exile, and not an expatriate - I can't, even if I wanted to, return 'home'. During the 1990 census, I was also denied the right to be Yugoslav, the nationality I identified myself with until then. (Being a child of a Croatian father and a Serbian mother, this left me somewhat confused).<sup>2</sup> The census researcher's answer to why this was impossible mirrored very closely something that Mussolini said to a French diplomat: "Yugoslavia does not exist. It is a heterogeneous conglomerate which you cobbled together in Paris" (cited in Glenny, 1999, p. 433).

The majority of the area that was Yugoslavia is situated on the Balkan Peninsula. It is important to mention that the darkness and mysticism of the Balkans was and is championed as a dominant representation. The British journalist Misha Glenny said, paraphrasing Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, that the Balkans occupy "the center of some sort of imaginary whirlpool," where "every known superstition is gathered" (Glenny, 1999, p. xxi).

Examples of this kind of stereotyping are numerous and will be dealt with, at length, later on in the text. Edith Durham, who wrote about the Balkans extensively and who put all the blame for the carnage that happened during the Great War squarely at the Slavs' door, said that "all civilisation should rise" and restrain the Balkan Slavs and their "haunted Christianity", from further brutality (Durham, 1920, p. 238). Archibald Lyall was a little bit kinder and more humorous when he wrote in *The Balkan Road* (1930) that "The natives only shoot their friends and acquaintances, and they seldom interfere

---

<sup>2</sup> After a lengthy argument with the census researcher who refused to identify my brother and myself, as Yugoslavs, our father asked him in exasperation "Can they be Eskimos?" So it happens now, that my brother and myself are the only two 'Eskimo' holders of a Croatian passport. Another option would have been to note us down as 'ostali', which literally means 'the others'.

with strangers. In Paris or Chicago you kill a man because you think he may have the price of drink in his pockets, but in the Balkans you only kill a man for some good cause, as that you disagree with his political views, or that his great-uncle once shot a second cousin of yours, or for some equally sound reason of that kind" (Lyall, 1930, pp. 157-158). So in *The Balkan Road*, the Balkan people are shown as relatively 'noble', but definitely still 'savages'.

As a consequence of the recent Yugoslav conflicts, this detrimental and narrow-minded stance on the Balkans was further reinforced. Astonishingly, statements such as the one given by Lord Owen, the European Union's peace negotiator during the early 1990s, were a common occurrence in the media: "What is most astounding, as everyone who has taken part in the negotiations in today's Yugoslavia will tell you, is the unbelievable capacity of people at all levels - to tell lies. An incredible phenomenon. Just look at how many ceasefires have been broken. And they carried on signing papers with the obvious intention of disregarding them. In ex-Yugoslavia our norms of honour don't exist, it's part of the culture. It's so widespread that you won't be at all surprised when you realise that X or Y is a liar, here people live with a culture of lies" (cited in Ugrešić, 1999, p. 69). In her remarkable book *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Todorova criticised Roger Cohen's exclamation that "the notion of killing people... because something that may have happened in 1495 is unthinkable in the Western World. Not in the Balkans." Todorova retorted: "He was quite right. In the Balkans they were killing over something that happened 500 years ago; [but] in Europe, with a longer span of civilised memory, they were killing over something that happened 2,000 years ago" (Todorova, 2009, p. 6).

So the Balkans, geographically a part of Europe, were constructed as “the other” within, and as such, according to Todorova:

able to absorb conveniently a number of externalized political, ideological, and cultural frustrations stemming from tensions and contradictions inherent to the regions and societies outside the Balkans. Balkanism became, in time, a convenient substitute for the emotional discharge that orientalism provided, exempting the West from charges of racism, colonialism, eurocentrism, and Christian intolerance against Islam. After all, the Balkans are in Europe; they are white; they are predominantly Christian, and therefore the externalisation of frustrations on them can circumvent the usual racial or religious bias allegations [...] the Balkans are left in Europe’s thrall, anticivilisation, alter ego, the dark side within (Todorova, 2009, p. 188).

Yugoslavia is bonded to the Balkans with almost unbreakable ties, and as such re-imagined over and over again by writers such as George Bernard Shaw, Agatha Christie, E.M. Forster, and Rebecca West among others. The reconstruction of this imaginary Balkans has gathered pace since the wars in the 1990s put the Balkans back on the world map. Scores of journalists, film directors, and politicians flooded in, and numerous film and literary products came out as a result. Dubravka Ugrešić, a well known writer from the former Yugoslavia, recalls running into an acquaintance from Sarajevo, in the autumn of 1996: “‘Sarajevo is echoing with the sound of gunfire and grenades from dozens of feature films being shot there,’ she said” (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 215).

One of the latest films on the war in Yugoslavia was Angelina Jolie's *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011), and if some sources are to be believed, this is what the word Balkan literally means: ‘blood and honey’<sup>3</sup>. ‘Balkanization’, originally denoting the fragmentation of large and viable political units,

---

<sup>3</sup> Other explanations link the word Balkan to a mountain or mountain range, a rugged area.



quickly became a synonym for primitive tribalism and backwardness. In the former Yugoslavia's official language, Serbo-Croatian, the word Balkan can be used as both noun and adjective. As an adjective it is usually pejorative, and is used to describe disorderly, primitive and uncultivated people. It can be also used as self-criticism. I personally use it at times when I need to justify my bluntness, my darkness and/or my need for mischief, as some sort of birthright that I can't help: "It's the Balkan in me that wants to do it." This stance on what the 'Balkan' has started to mean to me, only became evident once I moved to the West and adopted the West's attitudes and stereotypes about the Balkans. In the Balkans, there seems to be these prevailing negative self-perceptions that are further reinforced with a strongly disapproving and disparaging outside perception.

The French, according to Rebecca West, use the word 'Balkan' as a term of abuse, meaning a "rastaquouère type of barbarian", a smooth, untrustworthy foreigner (West, [1941] 1993, p. 21). In the 1942, Jacques Tourneur movie, *Cat People*, a nice American guy falls in love with a beautiful Serbian immigrant who seductively says things such as: "I like the dark, it's friendly." and who has a penchant for transforming herself into a panther every time she gets angry or sexually aroused. When things start to go very wrong, the American says: "God, what is with me? I was such a normal, happy guy." which in this context means, that any contact with this Balkan dangerous sensuality and otherness will get one into big trouble.

Central to my practice will be the work of a writer who went by the intimate nickname 'panther'<sup>4</sup>— Rebecca West and her 1941 masterpiece *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*. "I lay back in the darkness

---

<sup>4</sup> This is how Rebecca West signed off the letters to her long-term lover H.G. Wells.

and marvelled that I should be feeling about Yugoslavia as if it were my mother country, for this was 1937, and I had never seen the place till 1936. Indeed, I could remember the first time I ever spoke the name 'Yugoslavia' and that was only two and a half years before, on October the ninth, 1934" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1).

On the evening of October the ninth, 1934, while in hospital recovering from an operation, Rebecca West (1892 - 1983) turned the wrong knob on a radio and found music "that is above earth, that lives in the thunderclouds and rolls in human ears and sometimes deafens them without betraying the path of its melodic line. I heard the announcer relate how the King of Yugoslavia had been assassinated in the streets of Marseille that morning" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 2). A few days later she went to see the footage of the assassination. West looks at it several times, peering at it "like an old woman reading the tea leaves in her cup" and realises that to know nothing of an area which "threatened my safety" was "a calamity", she decides to embark on a journey through Yugoslavia (West, [1941] 1993, p. 15).

Rebecca West made three journeys: in the spring of 1936, as part of the British Council lecture tour of the Balkans; in the spring of 1937, with her husband Henry Andrews, and in the spring of 1938, on her own. The result of her three journeys was *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941). Initially intended as "a snap book" it spiralled into half a million words, a portrait not just of Yugoslavia, but also of Europe on the brink of the Second World War, and widely regarded as one of the literary masterpieces of the 20th century. "It turned out to be the central work of her life: a two-volume, 500,000-word book not only on history, archaeology, politics, conversation, folklore, prophecy, and the evocation of landscape, but the work in which Rebecca

West formulated her views on religion, ethics, art, myth and gender" (Glendinning, 1987, p. 154).

I was attracted to *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* as it is a vast memory repository of the country that does not exist any more. My country. Rebecca West's descriptions of Yugoslavia are so vivid and rich, and her language - highly descriptive and almost photographic in nature. One feels like one can really see and experience the places and the events she is describing. Compared to a metaphysical travel guide that never goes out of date (Dyer, 2006), it is curious at many stages in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* how little things have changed, and how prophetic West's writing was. Rebecca West herself calls the book a "prenatural event in my life", and wonders why she sacrificed five years of her life, to taking "an inventory of a country down to its last vest-button [...] a country which ceases to exist?", but then concludes that this is exactly the reason why; she felt a great need to capture a world that was about to disappear (West, 2000, p. 169).

In the first chapter I will look at Rebecca West's background and her personal circumstances, at her sense of displacement and isolation and how it shaped her worldviews, especially how it influenced the way West saw the former Yugoslavia. Rebecca West thought of Yugoslavia as a country where she could understand and be understood by its people, as both herself and the Yugoslavs, shared the fate of the displaced. West's three journeys will be outlined in this chapter, as well as the political situation in the years following *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon's* publication (1941). I will also look at the critical reviews of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* and try to explain why this book, that is considered a literary masterpiece by many critics, is still relatively obscure and unknown to the wider readership.

In the second chapter, I will look into Balkanism and its origins and how the Balkans have been seen by the West as almost a twilight zone that separates Europe's civilisation from the barbarism of the Orient. I will focus on Rebecca West's account of the former Yugoslavia and how it differed from the majority of reports by the Western writers and journalists of her time, or indeed any time. Called "One of Nature's Balkans" (Pritchett, 1990, p. 148), Rebecca West never 'othered' Yugoslavia. She favourably compares Yugoslavs to their Western European counterparts and wonders were the people who traveled in the Balkans before her, all either "singularly unfortunate" or "insanely delicate" to be giving such unfavourable accounts of the land they visited.

The third chapter will provide a synopsis of the Yugoslav conflicts that occurred in the 1990s and the far reaching, and according to some opinions, devastating influences Rebecca West's writing had on the area; admittedly following an odd chain of influences. The influence of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* on generations of readers has been widely acknowledged, but unlike many who commented on Yugoslavia, Rebecca West promoted the view that the Balkans are crucially important to the West's health and wealth. The two very different books that paid homage to *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Robert D. Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* and Tony White's *Another Fool in the Balkans* are analysed in this chapter. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is still on the NATO's website as suggested reading for soldiers and employees who wish to understand the history of the area. It is described as a "chronicle of Rebecca West's travels in the Former Yugoslavia in 1937 with insightful digressions into the history, politics and culture of the region" (NATO, 2012). The point should be made, however, that *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* should not be used as a policy-making manual, but should rather be looked upon as

a work of art. It makes as much sense to use this work of literature to inform policy makers' decisions in the Balkans, as it would be to look at Picasso's *Guernica* when attempting to learn more about the nature of the Spanish Civil War.

In the fourth chapter I will discuss the writings from the 1990s of a Yugoslav-born writer living in exile, Dubravka Ugrešić. This is done predominately in order to bridge the chapters describing Yugoslavia from the point of view of displaced outsiders to that of exiled insiders, from the pre-war generation (Second World War) to the post-war generation (Yugoslav conflicts). This chapter will also attempt to build a bridge between the Edwardian realism of West's writing and postmodernism, and from literature to the visual arts and specifically photography.

The fifth and last chapter will contextualize my own practice and explain the processes present in my research project as well as the decisions made around disseminating the work. Here, I will also look at three female Yugoslav artists living in exile: Marina Abramović, Tanja Ostojić and Šejla Kamerić and how they have dealt with the issues pertinent to their identity through their art practice, namely issues relating to stereotyping and borders.

The common thread between all the artists mentioned above<sup>5</sup> and my own practice is making work from the position of a person displaced. My practice led research looks at the effects of exile and displacement on memory and identity. It is my intention to explore the nature of seeing in situations when the whole world seems a bit like a foreign land. "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home: Exiles are aware of at least two,

---

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca West, Dubravka Ugrešić, Marina Abramović, Tanja Ostojić, Šejla Kamerić

and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that - to borrow a phrase from music - is contrapuntal" (Said, 2001, p. 186). The intersection of gender and displacement and how this makes one more sensitive to the issues of otherness, is what especially interests me.

When in exile it is imperative to hold in your memory the fragments of the place you have left, as this place houses the Self, and without this imaginary home one's very identity is in jeopardy. What happened in the area that was once Yugoslavia, is the repeated exile and exodus of its people throughout history. What I personally learned from the war is that once the country is no more: the streets that you grew up on are renamed, the borders you knew are redrawn and the history books you learned from are rewritten. As Peter Osborne says your existence "has become a non-possibility, for all points in which memory is anchored, through which the lines of life's narrative are threaded, have vanished. Not only have the exile's claims on a place in reality been denied, their access to the processes in which human identity is made has been blocked. To be deprived of one's space is to be deprived of the right of memory and thus the right to selfhood" (Osborne, 2000, p. 125). Is this the reason why I cling so desperately to photography?<sup>6</sup>

The Yugoslavs and Yugoslavia are relegated today, like Atlantis, into the realm of imaginary places. The question is posed: is identity tied to a nation or a state, or can a person build his or her own metaphysical home, one that can't so easily be annihilated and taken away? The subjects I am attempting to investigate are complex: disappearance of the country and identity, exile,

---

<sup>6</sup> Photographs stand in for memories; help us recall our past, serve as a proof of identity and as a material evidence of the past events.

memory. In order to achieve this, I require a roadmap, to which to adhere to ritualistically. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, a vast inventory of the lost country, provides this itinerary to almost the hour.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, how does one represent that which is no longer there? According to Jacques Rancière, the French philosopher, the answer is by artistic endeavour. "To investigate something that has disappeared, an event whose traces have been erased, to find witnesses and make them speak of the materiality of the event without canceling its enigma, is a form of investigation which certainly cannot be assimilated to the representative logic of verisimilitude [...] On the other hand, it is perfectly compatible with the relationship between the truth of an event and the fictional invention specific to the aesthetic regime in the arts" (Rancière, 2007, p.129). The camera, like some kind of a magical device, has the capacity to bear witness to the vanished past.

---

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca West, in essence, tells you where and what she ate on a daily basis, where she slept, which places did she visit as she traveled through Yugoslavia.

## Chapter 1: Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*: an 'exile's' journey through the exiled country

*In any class I feel at home, and I am never accepted, because of the traces I bear of my other origins. This does not, instance by instance, cause me any pain, but my experience of rejection has been an agony.*

Rebecca West (cited in Glendinning, 1987)

In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Rebecca West's husband Henry Andrews comments how profoundly different Yugoslavs are from "us". Brian Hall, in his article 'Rebecca West's War'<sup>8</sup>, proposes, "Maybe they were profoundly different from him and most other Englishmen, but they were exactly like Rebecca West" (Hall, 1996). When researching the life and work of Rebecca West, the sense of displacement, isolation and not belonging is quite prevalent through her existence and was a major factor in the formulation of her world-views and by proxy the way she saw and described Yugoslavia. Being the other herself, Rebecca West never 'othered' Yugoslavia.

According to her biographers (Glendinning, 1987; Rollyson, 1995), Rebecca West was born Cicely Isabel Fairfield on the 21st of December 1892 in London, England. Interestingly, about half of the sources on her biography, including the 1993 edition of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, state that she was

---

<sup>8</sup> *The New Yorker*, 15 Apr 1996.



born in County Kerry, Ireland. Her name is spelled differently on a number of occasions; Cecily in the 1901 census in London, England, Cicely in her biographies, and Cicily, the spelling she adopted later on in life. Cicily Isabel Fairfield changed her name to Rebecca West, a character in Ibsen's *play Rosmersholm*<sup>9</sup> when she was 19 years of age. West did this, because she thought that with a genteel name such as Cicely Isabel Fairfield, she had no hope to be ever taken seriously. When her second article for *The Freewoman* appeared, she notes in her scrapbook: "Rebecca West, born February 15, 1912" (cited in Rollyson, 1995, p. 19).

Rebecca West seems to have added handsomely to the confusion about her birthplace. When interviewed in 1981 by Marina Warner (*Paris Review*), she was asked the following question: "Is your Irish birth important to you?" to which West answers: "Frightfully, yes", and then she meanders on about some cousin that lives in the Cotswolds, in what appears to be an attempt at avoiding giving a more elaborated answer to the interviewer's question. Later on she recounts a story of an Irish priest who "said a beautiful thing to me the other day, and I absolutely loved it. He looked at those books and said - ... - "What are you doing with all your books, when you're dead? You must have planned for them." I said, "I'm giving those Oxford dictionaries to the grandson of Oscar Wilde, Merlin Holland." And he said, 'Oh, how beautiful that makes it all. It's rather as if it hadn't happened.' I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'Well, your family lives in Fitzwilliam Square and Wilde's people lived in Merrion Square and it's such a natural thing to do for a family in Fitzwilliam Square to give their Oxford dictionaries to the son of a family living in Merrion Square.' Almost as if it hadn't happened. He could not have added a word to it" (cited in Warner, 1981). Here, West is talking about the

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibsen's Rebecca West seduces a married man after pushing his wife to commit suicide.

two well-known addresses in Dublin, Ireland. The sentence "It's rather as if it hadn't happened" is a curious one. Does this imply that perhaps West's and Wilde's family both had to leave Ireland 'under the cloud'?

During the course of the research, contact was made with West's biographer, Carl Rollyson (March, 2012), to try and clarify the matter of her birth country. Rollyson expressed no doubt that West was born in London, however, when asked did he ever see West's birth certificate, he said that he did not. Attempts were made to find the records of her birth and/or the birth of her father through the National Library of Ireland and The General Register Office archives. This search, so far, proved futile as the records were not located and the research had to be abandoned due to time limitations.

In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, she tells the chambermaid that she "was not truly English, but half Scottish and half Anglo-Irish" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 460). West compares Scottish to Bosnians, and when trying to explain Anglo-Irish, the chambermaid gets an impression that to be Anglo-Irish was to be like a "Turkish landowner among the conquered Slavs" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 460). Like many other displaced persons, who feel rejected by their own 'mother' country, West's attitude towards her Anglo-Irish ancestry seems conflicted. In a letter to George Bernard Shaw [1917 - 1918], she writes: "Those Protestant Irish of the governing class who were reared up with the understanding that they had been born kings and that it was their duty to hate the rest of the world, and so acquired a lifelong incapacity for love, are the most beastly of human beings" (West, 2000, p. 38). West calls her father in this letter a "Dublin snob" who grew up like Oscar Wilde on Merrion Square. This contradicts the story of her family living in Fitzwilliam Square. West seemed to have alternated between her English and Anglo-Irish identity

according to need and mood. The same could be said of her political convictions; West described herself for a long time as a left-wing journalist, but when asked in 1976 (*Tonight*, BBC) whether she still thinks of herself left-wing, she answers: "No, because I know more."

Rebecca West rightfully acquired the recognition, fame and social standing she craved in her youth. Victor S. Pritchett calls her, in the title of his essay, "One of Nature's Balkans", and explains that West's desire for "glamour of wealth and respectable certainty" was a consequence of being a 'displaced person' as a child and as a young woman (Pritchett, 1990, p. 148). According to her biographer Victoria Glendinning, Rebecca West found the decline of her family very sad. Her grandfather did not know who he really was, her father grew up in social isolation, "and there was my mother and my sister and I living the most terrible kind of isolated life - we knew nobody" (cited in Glendinning, 1987, p. 27). As Rebecca West confirms further: "In any class I feel at home, and I am never accepted, because of the traces I bear of my other origins. This does not, instance by instance, cause me any pain, but my experience of rejection has been an agony" (cited in Glendinning, 1987, p. 27). In her old age, West would spend much time tracing her family's scanty connections with British nobles, an addiction apparently inherited from her father Charles Fairfield. These pedigrees gave West a sense of stability and belonging, something denied to her as her family became increasingly displaced: "The Ireland of their father's youth was the promised land never to be regained" (Glendinning, 1987, p. 27). Susan Hertog, West's partial biographer<sup>10</sup>, was also contacted and asked to comment on West as a person displaced, to which she replied: "I think the rootlessness you speak about is

---

<sup>10</sup> *Dangerous Ambition: Rebecca West and Dorothy Thompson: New Women in Search of Love and Power* (2011).

real" and according to Hertog, caused by being an immigrant, among other things (March 2012).

When Rebecca West said in a 1975 *Sunday Telegraph* article: "Everyone realises that one can believe little of what people say about each other. But it is not so widely realised that even less can one trust what people say about themselves", she might have been talking about herself. With West, like with many other displaced people and exiles, there is a propensity to see one's own identity as a process, perhaps even a fiction. The personal history, once the roots are gone, gets constructed and reconstructed many times. Bonnie Kime Scott, editor of *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, speaks of West's concern about her own biography and how she scrutinized scholars who produced work about her life, savagely attacking them for their inaccuracies, while at the same time her own accounts of her family life were "inconsistent at best" (West, 2000, p. 418). For example, in a letter to her publisher Alan Maclean (dated 12 October 1978), West criticised Harold Orel's book *The Literary Achievements of Rebecca West* stating that Orel's account is "wholly malicious and tried to cover up the malice by occasional flattering adjectives. It had hardly a correct fact in it. He is illiterate and judges me by the standards of an ill-informed man" (West, 2000, p. 463). Motley Deakin, the American professor at the University of Florida and the author of *Rebecca West* (1980), did not fare much better. On the 21 April 1980, Rebecca West penned him a letter in which she wished he actually tried to learn something about her personal life, that his chronology was all wrong and that what embarrasses her the most "is that you do not seem to have any idea of what sort of life I have led" (West, 2000, pp. 473 - 474).

According to Glendinning, she "drafted and redrafted the raw material of her life until she was on her deathbed", reconstructing her past as if it were a "bad book" that needed improving (Glendinning, 1987, p. 24). She admits that her "three names clashed in my head, Cicely Fairfield, Cicily Andrews, Rebecca West, I could not choose between them" (cited in Glendinning, 1987, p. 249). Could she not choose, or simply did not know? Rebecca West, like many people without defined roots, had "a mind as much self-distant as self absorbed", a mind that "must live in at least two places at once: in the country of is and in the land of was" (Simmel, 1950, p. 402). In exiles, "what feels closest is what is most distant, and what feels most remote is what is at hand" (Simmel, 1950, p. 402). For West, Yugoslavia - the distant country - became her metaphysical motherland, where she could understand and be understood by its people by the mere fact that they largely shared her fate. The fate of the displaced.

## The three journeys

*What a journey - what a place!*

Rebecca West (1936)

*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is structured to appear like a result of one journey, as opposed to being based on three separate trips. During her first visit to Yugoslavia, West wrote long, excited letters that read like rough drafts of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. As in the book itself, the letters are a "shrewd analysis" with "eagle-eyed descriptions peppered with wry anecdotes underpinned by startling emphatic assertion about human nature, all wrapped in a unique grammar -- namely, a shortage of commas" (Kerr, 2000). On the 22 April 1936, she writes excitedly to her husband about Skopje, Macedonia, "isn't it fantastic the way there's almost nothing [here] except bread and cabarets. Poverty & entertainment - it's very odd" (West, 2000, p. 144).

While in Skopje in 1936, West's guide through Yugoslavia - *Constantine* - real name Stanislav Vinaver (1891 -1955) - made advances to her. In a letter to her husband, dated May 1936, West describes Vinaver as a: "man of 45, short, fat, like a Jewish Mr. Pickwick, with a head like a cone with the apex cut off thatched with coarse black curls" (West, 2000, p. 147). One day, upon her return to the hotel<sup>11</sup>, after the day of outings, "Mr. Vinaver jumped up on poor Rac. I was polite at first, then I got violent, then I got frightened" (West,

---

<sup>11</sup> In Ohrid, Macedonia.

2000, p. 148). He attempted it again in Belgrade, many times over, while she was ill in bed, and after being rebuked, said to West: "you treat my love as England treated Lord Byron" (West, 2000, p. 151). Both Victoria Glendinning (1987) and Carl Rollyson (1995) suggest in their respective biographies of Rebecca West that she used Vinaver's amorous advances as a decoy, in order to hide the fact that she re-ignited her affair with the Romanian prince Antoine Bibesco, her former lover whom she met by surprise in Belgrade (Glendinning, 1987, p. 155). This is very probable, as the following year, Vinaver was again the guide for both Rebecca West and her husband.

*Constantine* is one of the central characters of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Writing to Stoyan Pribicevic in 1945, in response to his critical review of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, she describes Vinaver as "criminally voluble, I have never known any human being talk so much, but he was a kind creature with great enthusiasm and affection for work of art and human beings, he loved meeting the people we came across on the road and drew them out, he had a lot of information, and his situation was of course a godsend to a writer" (West, 2000, p. 190). Born Stanislav Vinaver in Šabac, Bosnia in 1891, into a Jewish-Serbian family, Vinaver was a well-known Yugoslav poet and a writer who worked as a press bureau chief for the Yugoslav government from 1936-1938. Vinaver was assigned by the Yugoslav government as Rebecca West's official guide. His incessant talking and poeticism provided West with a lot of material, and regardless of his foolish behaviour, she decided to go back to Yugoslavia again the following year, explaining to her husband: "The bother is I do love Yugoslavia" (West, 2000, pp. 151-152).

Upon returning from her first trip to Yugoslavia, West wrote a very entertaining and long letter to Colonel Charles Bridge of the British Council,

who had sent her there in the first place, in which she wrote that the tour was in many respects a "waste of your money and my time" (West, 2000, p. 154). Regardless of this statement, and the flaws in the itinerary that West reiterates in her letter, West admits that she enjoyed the journey enormously. The following year Rebecca West resumes her project, because she found Yugoslavia "the country I have always seen between sleeping and waking" and as "it was like picking up a strand of wool that would lead me out of a labyrinth in which, to my surprise, I found myself immured" (West, [1941] 1993, pp. 1088-1089).

The following spring (1937) West travelled to Yugoslavia for a second time, accompanied by her husband Henry Andrews. In the prologue to *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, West addresses the reader, through addressing her husband, who is somewhat reluctant to undertake such a long journey with her, that once he's there he [the reader] will understand why it was so important to experience this journey, and continues: "The thing I wanted to tell him could not be told, however, because it was manifold and nothing like what one is accustomed to communicate by words" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 23). This sentence strongly communicates what West wanted to do and was in most part, very successful in achieving: to conjure the place so vividly, so richly, by using her highly descriptive, almost photographic language. When she arrives in Zagreb, her first stop on the journey through Yugoslavia, she declares: "I was among the people I could understand" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 38). It is worth mentioning that West made great attempts to become fluent in Serbo-Croatian, the official language of the country.

Rebecca West returned for a third time in 1938, on her own, in order to do some additional research for the book that would become *Black Lamb and*



*Grey Falcon*. In a letter to her husband, dated 15 May 1938, West writes that it was of great benefit coming back as she had forgotten the atmosphere of the place and also mentions that the sacrifice on the stone<sup>12</sup> is now "the clou"<sup>13</sup> of her book (West, 2000, p. 166).

---

<sup>12</sup> The motif of a black lamb appears a number of times throughout the book, most significantly, when being sacrificed on the fertility stone in Macedonia. West is appalled by this act as in it perpetuates an idea that one has to suffer in order to obtain goodness.

<sup>13</sup> The main point of interest.

## What happened next?

*I have learned now that it might follow, because an empire passed, that a world full of strong men and women and rich food and heady wine might nevertheless seem like a shadow-show.*

Rebecca West (1941)

*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* was handed to publishers shortly after the Axis forces invaded Yugoslavia. At the time, the official line of the British propaganda machine was that Prince Paul of Yugoslavia was pro-Hitler, and it was thus how West described him in the *Epilogue of Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Neil Balfour, the co-author of *Paul of Yugoslavia*, published in 1980, called West's description of Prince Paul in her epilogue "astonishingly misinformed" (cited in Glendinning, 1987, p. 161). What transpired later is that when Prince Paul signed a pact with the Axis powers in March of 1941, he did so in an attempt to keep his country out of the war. According to this treaty, German troops were not allowed to use Yugoslavia as a military corridor. The treaty was as favourable to Yugoslavia as it could be, at that moment in time. In an attempt to explain to her solicitor why she wrote what she did in the epilogue, she asks how "could I possibly know what was going on except through the Foreign office? Who do they think suggested I wrote a final chapter to my book except the Ministry of information?" (cited in Glendinning, 1987, p. 161).

*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* was published in 1941. By that time Yugoslavia had been abolished, and Rebecca West found that she had written more than a thousand pages about a country that was no more. An "incubus of a book" she calls it in a letter to Ben Huebsch (West, 2000, p. 168). Her original intention, to write a short book on the area, now seemed laughable and left West wondering why, in 1936, she had been moved "to devote five years of my life, at great financial sacrifice and to the utter exhaustion of my mind and body to take on an inventory of a country down to its last vest-button, in a form insane from any other artistic or commercial point of view" (West, 2000, p. 169). Taking on such a complex subject as Yugoslavia, seemed to her at times senseless, "but the thing just got hold of me and made me do it." The behaviour of her publishers, was not giving any confidence either, West only secured £200 advance from Macmillan, while Viking agreed to 15% royalties on sales between 4000-6000 copies, and 25% on sales over 6000. If less than 4000 books were sold, West would receive no royalties at all. In retrospect, the last letter she sends to her husband from her final journey through Yugoslavia (15th May 1938), now seems naive: "I have a feeling that once I have done this book, all my work and my life will be simpler" (West, 2000, p. 166).

One of the reasons why Rebecca West's life did not become any simpler after the publication of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is her perceived pro-Serbian stance. Even her biographer states that: "Rebecca West was not keen on the Croats, because they reminded her of Catholic Irish" (Glendinning, 1987, p. 155). This contradicts what West writes in her prologue, where she abhors the English who go to the Balkans "to see who was in fact ill-treating whom, and, being by the very nature of their perfectionist faith unable to accept the horrid hypothesis that everybody was ill-treating everybody else, all came

back with a pet Balkan people established in their hearts as suffering and innocent, eternally the massacred and never the massacer" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 20).

Although West ascribed good looks, intellectual curiosity and bravery to all Yugoslavs, she was more impressed with Serbs as they were not spoilt, like Croats, by the centuries under Hapsburg rule. West's belief that each nation should have its own country, "in order to cultivate its Soul" (West, 1934, p. 323), was somewhat tested by the Croatians. In quite harsh words, Brian Hall comments that West was "never able to resolve in her own mind whether the Croats were really a separate nation or just a cheap, out-of-focus copy of the Serbs" (Hall, 1996). West also thought that the Croats should be grateful to the Serbs for defending them for centuries against the Turks, even if she knew that the Croats were suffering under Serbian-biased Yugoslavia. West believed that the only way that Yugoslavia would be able to defend itself against the external aggressors, depended on staying together. The question poses itself, was West swayed in her opinion by the official government line provided through her guide *Constantine* (Stanislav Vinaver), who was after all, a government official? When the bombing raids started in London, Rebecca West often prayed, "Let me behave like a Serb" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1126) and when Yugoslavia fell to the Germans, out of concerns for Stanislav Vinaver, their Jewish friend and guide, West and her husband Henry Andrews offered him asylum in England. Vinaver refused the offer, and was eventually sent to a prison in Germany. West sent him food parcels through the Red Cross, but they were never to meet again in person.

During the Second World War, West's husband Henry Andrews worked for the Ministry of Economic Warfare, specifically on a committee that dealt with

plans for the post-war economic recovery of the Balkans. West was, on the other hand, highly involved with the Yugoslav government in exile. At the time, there were two rival Yugoslav relief organisations in Britain; Rebecca spoke only at the meetings of the one supported by the royalists, the Yugoslav Relief Society. West also co-operated with the British government in providing them with the information she had gathered on her research trips in Yugoslavia. When the British Air Ministry enquired whether she had notes or illustrations of industrial objectives dating from her research visits, she sent what she had (Glendinning, 1987, p. 159). An interesting coincidence is that the Yugoslav government Information Service operated from an apartment in Kingston House in Kensington where Rebecca West herself was to live after Henry Andrews' death. West's involvement in anti-Nazi activities ensured her a place in the Gestapo's Black Book, or Sonderfahndungsliste O.B. (literally translated as the Special Search List G.B.), the list of prominent British people to be arrested in the case of a successful invasion of Britain by Nazi Germany.

Both Rebecca West and her husband helped Yugoslav refugees. They used their money and influence to help them find jobs and/or educational opportunities in England and America. Milan Gavrilović, leader of the Serbian Peasant Party in exile, became a lifelong friend of West and her husband. They stayed in contact, even after he and his family moved to Washington, and West even helped Gavrilović's grown up children later on. According to Carl Rollyson, "The bond between Rebecca and the Gavriloviés became especially profound because she identified with their exile" (Rollyson, 1995, p. 189). Henry Andrews requested in his final will that West would continue to help those friends whom he had been able to assist during his lifetime, and she did.

In the remnants of Yugoslavia during the Second World War, the Ustaše, pro-Nazi nationalists, took over Croatia. They were so brutal in their administration of the Serbs and other minorities that the German authorities attempted on a number of occasions to bring this genocide to a halt. Their concern was not so much the genocide, but the number of people, who as a reaction, retreated to the underground movement and joined Tito's partisans. Josip Broz Tito (1892 - 1980), West's contemporary, was a communist leader of the Partisans. The appeal of the Partisans was that they vouched to protect all the different nationalities that lived in Yugoslavia, unlike the other anti-Nazi resisting force, the Chetniks, who were both royalist and pro-Serb. One of Tito's well-known tactics (in combat and recruiting) was hit-and-run which caused German retaliation against the local civilians. The crueller the German soldiers were, the more people joined the Partisans. The complex national landscape in Yugoslavia, added to the 'attractiveness' of the Partisans.<sup>14</sup>

The Allies' stance toward two opposing forces that were trying to liberate Yugoslavia from the Nazis was a complicated one. Winston Churchill said in his address to the Conservative Central Council, the first address since he became a party leader (27 Mar 1941), that the Yugoslavs are a "valiant and warlike race." Allies had, at the beginning, championed Draža Mihajlović and his Chetniks as heroes in a Yugoslavian fight against the Nazis, and the role of the Partisans who were increasingly growing in numbers and strength was not recognised properly. Rebecca West, being a pro-royalist, also supported Draža Mihajlović. In January 1944, Churchill 'jumped a horse' and decided to

---

<sup>14</sup> My grandfather was a Serbian landowner in Croatia, and not a communist, but the only choice of surviving the war in pro-Nazi Croatia was to join the Partisans. After the Second World War was over, he was accused of being anti-communist and served a five-year sentence in the notorious political prison Goli Otok, meaning Naked Island, a barren formation of rocks in the Adriatic Sea.

support Josip Broz Tito instead. Rebecca West was outraged and she let her dissatisfaction be known. According to Victoria Glendinning's biography of Rebecca West, she was taken to a lunch in the Ritz where Sir Orme Sargent explained to her that the new policy of supporting Tito was of military necessity, as he was killing more Germans than Mihajlović did. The official line became that Draža Mihajlović was a traitor collaborating with the Nazis. Sir Orme Sargent's 'prep-talk' was futile; Rebecca West never changed her alliances. In her letter to Lady Grigg, wife of Sir James Grigg (29 April 1946), she asks for help regarding the large number of Mihajlović supporters, now in the prisoners of war camps as she worried for what their future might be.

Rebecca West's opinion of Churchill only worsened with time. More than a decade after the Second World War ended, she wrote in a letter to Charles Curran, a British editor and politician (22 March 1955), that Churchill "is irrational, ungracious, with no real liking for good; and he is a shocking judge of people... The only thing about the horrid old man is that he refuses to die" (West, 2000, p. 293). Although West may never have had enough information to make such a firm stance, she never let the matter rest. On the 21st of April 1972, she writes to the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement* vehemently denying that Draža Mihajlović was collaborating with the Nazis. In it she acknowledges: "I wrote this letter without any real hope that the truth will prevail. I do not think it can. But I am revolted by the continuance of the anti-Mihajlović campaign. The situation was quite simple. Churchill one day came to the decision that he could please Stalin by giving him Yugoslavia, and therefore he backed Tito. His decision could be smelt in the London air as soon as he had made it [...] as I say, in no great hope that the truth will prevail. But I feel obliged to describe the situation as it appeared to me over the years of observation" (West, 2000, p. 436). Rebecca West also defended her

position on Prince Paul as a Nazi supporter, in a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* and sued the *Spectator* successfully, receiving £2500 in damages that she then donated to the Serbian Orthodox Church in London. Interestingly, even after the considerable backlash, when *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* was re-published in 1982, Rebecca West did not change a word of it.

In 1948 Tito said no to Stalin. This daring decision put Yugoslavia among some of the most important players outside of the two power pacts (NATO and Warsaw Pact). Yugoslavia also founded a Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), now a group of 120 countries that did not align themselves with or against any major power block. After the relationship with the Soviet Union was normalised in the mid 1950s, the Yugoslavian passport became one of the most valuable on the black market, as it allowed its holder to cross more borders without a visa than any other travel document in the world. The regime was very liberal compared to other communist countries. "Yugoslavia became a key intellectual entrepôt between East and West." As "For liberal westerners, this was a balmy communism which most felt they could support with a good conscience" (Glenny, 1999, p. 588). Tito's funeral in 1980 was attended by a record number of heads of state, with the only noticeable exemption being the newly elected USA president, Ronald Regan. Rebecca West was never able to appreciate Tito's achievements in his fight against the Nazis and that in 1948 Yugoslavia became the first country in Eastern Europe to achieve independence from the Soviet bloc. Her post-war anti-Communism, prevented her from going back to Yugoslavia, the country she loved so much.



On 30th of August 1956, West responded to a letter from Mrs. Tyson, which inquired about the people mentioned in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, letting her know that most of their lives ended tragically and concluded the letter with the statement: "I feel that much of myself has died with these people, but that did not help them" (West, 2000, p. 313). Regardless of how right or wrong West was regarding her support of royalists, what she did witness, in part, is how history changes according to who is in power. Born the same year as Tito (1892), she died three years after he died (1980), never having to see the inferno into which her beloved metaphysical motherland succumbed.

## The mystery of its relative obscurity

Rebecca West was not sure about *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* and called it a "wretched, complicated book that won't interest anybody" (cited in Jacobs, 2012). Contrary to her opinion, the book received rave reviews upon its publication in 1941. In *The New Yorker*, Clifton Fadiman pronounced *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* "one of the greatest books of spiritual revolt against the twentieth century" (25 Oct 1941). *The Times* called it "A masterpiece. As astonishing in its range, in the subtlety and power of its judgment, as it is brilliant in expression"; to *The New York Times* it was a "brilliant mosaic of Yugoslavian travel" (Woods, 1941).

John Gunther, West's one time lover, wrote in *Inside Europe* (1938) that "It is an intolerable affront to human and political nature that these wretched and unhappy little countries in the Balkan peninsula can, and do, have quarrels that cause world wars. Some hundred and fifty thousand young Americans died because of an event in 1914 in a mud-caked primitive village, Sarajevo. Loathsome and almost obscene snarls in Balkan politics, hardly intelligible to a Western reader, are still vital to the peace of Europe, and perhaps the world." It was surprising then to find his letter to Rebecca West dated 6th October 1941, in which he wrote, "I thought *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* belongs with Velasquez, the third act of King Lear, and all nine symphonies of Beethoven" (cited in West, 2000, p. 174).

Although most of the reviews were very positive, a number of negative views were voiced. Edith Durham, a prolific writer on the Balkans, was not

impressed. She stated that: "The novelist Miss West has written an immense book on the strength of one pleasure trip to Yugoslavia, but with no previous knowledge of land or people" (cited in Dyer, 2006). Nigel Dennis calls it in *The New Republic* "the quest of the frustrated Western intellectual" (1 Dec 1941). But what irked West the most, was the review written in *The National* (8 Jun 1941) by Yugoslav Stoyan Pribicevic in which he complains that West adopted Stanislav Vinaver's stance on Yugoslav politics. He also writes:

There is something odd about English women: when they become interested in the Balkans, they are more partisan than the Balkans themselves." After citing several of her errors and distortions and calling her naive, he states: "what good does it do at this time to rake up this unpleasant past?" and then he closes with the admission that despite the inaccuracies, "Rebecca West's book is a magnificent piece of writing. Her pages pour over you sometimes like an irresistible torrent, sometimes like a monotonous drizzle... Reading it, you actually see, smell, hear and touch as well; and you experience an intense sensual joy (Pribicevic, 1941).

West, annoyed at being portrayed like someone swayed by the government official (Stanislav Vinaver) writes in a letter to Pribicevic, dated the 5th of June 1945: "The trouble about you, my lad, is that you are beautiful but dumb" (West, 2000, p. 189).

The analysis of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, started again in earnest when the political situation in Yugoslavia worsened. In 1991, at the beginning of a civil war that would ravage the land and break up Yugoslavia, Larry Wolf calls the book in *The New York Times* article a "weird masterpiece" and also, "the supreme literary monument of one of the most brilliant writers of the 20th century." In her article 'A Woman Without Compromise', Sarah Kerr calls *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* a "baggy masterpiece", "which remains a gold

standard for literary reporting even if its odder idiosyncrasies could never (and probably should never) be imitated" (Kerr, 2000).

Keeping in mind the amount of critics and readers that consider *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* a masterpiece, and also the book's far-reaching influence on other writers, political commentators and policy makers, it is curious that *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is still relatively unknown. A number of factors might be at play here. Firstly, the book seems to fall between genres and resists classification. It is at the same time a travel memoir, an autobiography, a historical and philosophical meditation, and a book of prophecies. Paul Fussel, an American cultural and literary historian, mentions it only in passing in *Abroad* (1980). The British writer Geoff Dyer thinks one of the reasons lies in the fact that since literature in English is synonymous with the novel, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is removed from the company in which it belongs. If you look at it as a history text: "this is a history as it might have been written by Ryszard Kapuscinski or Gabriel Garcia Marquez" (Dyer, 2006). Secondly, as Walter Kendrick wrote in *The New York Times*: "Maybe West wrote too much; extreme fecundity is often thought to preclude excellence. Maybe she specialised too little; extreme variety also arouses skepticism" (Kendrick, 1996). Maybe her novels, were not on the same level as her non-fiction work, and cost her the acclaim she deserves for writing *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Other possible reasons could lie perhaps, in her harsh criticism, which made her many enemies within the literary world. She called E.M Forster "a self indulgent old liberal with hardly a brain in his head" (West, 2000, p. 440), Ibsen "cried out for ideas for the same reason that men call out for water, because he had not got any", and George Bernard Shaw who said of West that she could "handle a pen as brilliantly as I ever could, and much more savagely.", gets in return called a "silly old bouffant" (Rebecca West, 1976).

To conclude in Rebecca West's own words, "The answer is too long, as long indeed, as this book, which hardly anybody will read by reason of its length" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 773?).

## Chapter 2: Rebecca West's Yugoslavia, Two Vagabonds and an encounter that never took place

*Talking of war, there'll be trouble in the Balkans in the spring*

Rudyard Kipling (1899)

The history of the Balkans and Yugoslavia is a long and complicated one, and not the primary focus of this research project. What is important to note is that historically the Balkans have been seen by the West as an ill-charted zone that separated Europe's civilisation from the barbarism of the Orient. Maria Todorova makes a distinction between orientalism, "which is a discourse about an imputed opposition" and balkanism which is "a discourse about an imputed ambiguity" (Todorova, 2009, p. 17).

The uneasy relationships between the West and the Balkans started around the time of the Balkan wars (1912-1913). An international commission was founded by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1910 to inquire into the causes of the Balkan wars. The report produced by this commission included an introduction by Baron d'Estournelle de Constant in which he wrote: "The real culprits in this long list of executions, assassinations, drowning, burnings, massacres and atrocities furnished by our report, are not, we repeat, the Balkan peoples. Here pity must conquer indignation. Do not let us condemn the victims [...] The real culprits are those by interest or inclination, declaring that war is inevitable, and by making so,

asserting that they are powerless to prevent it" (cited in Todorova, 2009, p. 4). Unfortunately, Baron d'Estournelle de Constant was in a minority.

The Balkans, in nineteenth-century literature, were looked upon mostly through the aristocratic lens. The authors of *Two Vagabonds in the Balkans* (1926) commented: "Optical travelling is the first confession of aristocratic desires. To watch others is aristocratic." On the other hand to exist next to the others, rub shoulder with them and feel with them "to find both pleasure and increased humanity in these things - is purely democratic and is the rarest humour to find in the world" (Gordon and Gordon, 1926, p. 88). This detached aristocratic seeing could explain some of the prejudices that were formed at that time. As Rebecca West, who calls herself an 'exasperated critic' of her own empire commented:

The nineteenth-century English traveller tended to form an unfavourable opinion of the Christian subjects of the Ottoman empire on the grounds that they were dirty and illiterate and grasping (as poor people, oddly enough, often are) and cringing and inhospitable and ill-mannered (as frightened people, oddly enough, often are). He condemned them as he condemned the inhabitants of the new industrial hells in Lancashire and Yorkshire, who insisted on smelling offensively, drinking gin to excess, and being rough and rude (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1095).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the opinions of the English did not change significantly; the writers coming from the United Kingdom were often prone to facile stereotyping. Harry De Windt, the British explorer and travel writer, described the Balkans as "savage Europe" and "wild and lawless countries between the Adriatic and the Black-Seas" (De Windt, 1907, p. 15). Edith Durham stepped into the Balkans, according to Todorova, with "the same notions and emotions today's children step into a dinosaur museum" (Todorova, 2009, p.

120). According to Durham, the Balkans were an opera bouffe written in blood. "Its raw, primitive ideas, which date from the world's well-springs, its passionate strivings, its disastrous failures, grip the mind; its blaze of colour, its widely magnificent scenery hold the eye" (Durham, 1905, p. 81). This is just a typical offering from Durham's oeuvre on the Balkans. She despised Serbs so much that she went as far as to return the order of St. Sava to King Peter of Yugoslavia, accusing him and his people as guilty of the biggest crime in history, causing the Great War.

In *The Secret of the Chimneys* (1925), Agatha Christie conjures her own fictional Balkan country, named Herzoslovakia, which presumably stands in for the whole area. It's described as "one of the Balkan states... Principal rivers, unknown. Principal mountains, also unknown, but fairly numerous. Capital, Ekarest. Population, chiefly brigands. Hobby, assassinating kings and having revolutions" (Christie, [1925] 1975, pp. 9-10). The importance of this description is that it reflected the popular image of the Balkans at the time, and through Christie's incredible popularity this discourse was propagated to a wider audience.

In *The Soul of the East* (1928), a book by Swedish writer Marcus Ehrenpreis, the Balkan people are described as eccentric, loud, too impulsive and too eager. "Oddish, incredible individuals appear on all sides – low foreheads, sodden eyes, protruding ears, thick underlips [Ehrenpreis' description suggests that the Balkan people are subhuman]. The Levantine type in the areas between the Balkans and the Mediterranean is, psychologically and socially, truly a 'wavering form', a composite of Easterner and Westerner, multilingual, cunning, superficial, unreliable, materialistic and, above all, without tradition." Ehrenpreis ascribes the low intellectual and low moral



quality of the Balkan people to this lack of tradition. However, a very interesting point is made here by Ehrenpreis when he says that "In a spiritual sense these creatures are homeless; they are no longer Orientals nor yet Europeans. They have not freed themselves from the vices of the East nor acquired any of the virtues of the West" (Ehrenpreis, 1928, pp. 12-13).

These opinions the West had of the Balkans were cemented by the assassination of Emperor Franz Ferdinand of Austria on the 28th of June 1914 in Sarajevo (now Bosnia and Herzegovina), an event that many have described as the immediate cause of the First World War. Todorova calls this assassination the Balkans' "original sin" (Todorova, 2009, p. 118). Bosnian Serb Gavrilo Princip, a quiet eighteen year old, who assassinated Franz Ferdinand, was portrayed at the time by the Western media as a prototype of the Balkan troublesome sort. It was not mentioned, however, that according to his psychiatrist Dr. Martin Pappenheim, Princip had a tremendous sense of guilt about the retributions that Serbs and others suffered as a result of his actions. More than forty million people lost their lives in the Great War. The sad fact was that when Hitler attacked Yugoslavia in 1941, he used the Sarajevo assassination of Franz Ferdinand to justify his actions; Hitler brought untold suffering to Yugoslavia, because in his words the Yugoslavs "brought untold suffering upon the world when they organised the assassination in Sarajevo" (Berlin, 6 Apr 1941).

The attitude of the Western media towards the Balkans is especially evident in the *New Yorker* review (1941) of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, when Clifton Fadiman asks: "Why should this highly cultivated English woman make pilgrimage after pilgrimage to these dark lands and those violent and often primitive peoples?" (Fadiman, 1941). The reason why Rebecca West made

these 'pilgrimages' is because she knew "that the past has made the present", and she "wanted to see how the process works" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 54).

## Rebecca West's Yugoslavia

In an introduction to the 1993 edition of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Trevor Royle writes about how at the time of Rebecca West's first visit to Yugoslavia in 1936, she was experiencing an "intense emotional hollowness" and that she was clearly looking for something to fill it with (Royle in West, [1941] 1993, p.xii). By this time in her career, West had already achieved a significant amount of fame, but her private life was not a happy one and was "a mass of conflicting emotions" (Royle in West [1941] 1993, p.xii). In many ways West was still reeling from the failed relationship she had with H.G. Wells and many conflicts arose around the questions relating to the upbringing of their son, Anthony. According to her biographer Victoria Glendinning, West also stopped having a sexual relationship with her husband, she suffered a miscarriage, was experiencing health issues and in general going through a major midlife crisis at this point (Glendinning, 1987).

When Rebecca West completed the last of her three journeys to Yugoslavia in 1938, she acknowledged that nothing in her life affected her deeper than this experience. The reason for this, West believes, is that the shapes and forms of Yugoslavia coincided with the forms and shapes of her imagination. Her journey moved her because "it was like picking up a strand of wool that would lead me out of a labyrinth in which, to my surprise, I had found myself immured. It might be that when I followed the thread to its end I would find myself faced with locked gates, and that this labyrinth was my solo portion on this earth. But at least I now knew its twists and turns, and what corridor led

into what vaulted chamber, and nothing in my life before I went to Yugoslavia had even made plain these mysteries" (West, [1941] 1993, pp. 1088-1089).

Rebecca West loved Yugoslavia: its strong drink and rich food, handsome men and its "pale women with dark hair who even in daylight look as if one were seeing them by moonlight" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 460); and she loved those highly charged intellectual conversations that ran into the small hours, where people made the most outlandish connections and statements with typically unshakable confidence. She favourably compares Croatians to Austrians, a highly unusual thing to do by a Western observer of that time... or indeed any time, saying how Austrians talk a lot but they don't possess a "raging polyglot intellectual curiosity" and a tendency to turn out "universal literature on the floor as if it were a ragbag". She also writes that it would be impossible to read aloud to a party of Yugoslavs, like she was read to at a house of a Viennese banker, "unless one bound and gagged the guests beforehand" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 63).

It's not unusual that Geoff Dyer compared *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* to a metaphysical travel guide that never goes out of date. It is curious at many stages in the book how little things have changed. The Croatian city of Split has been known in the former Yugoslavia for their very good-looking and elegantly dressed population. And indeed Rebecca West comments that they are "tall, lean, upright in pride of body (West, [1941] 1993, p. 170) and that "people here are not rich, yet there is considerable elegance" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 142). An English teacher in Dalmatia tells West: "You evidently don't understand that here in Split we are very much on parade. We're not a bit like the Serbs, who don't care what they do, who laugh and cry when they feel like it, and turn cartwheels in the street if they want exercise" (West, [1941] 1993,

p. 141). And interestingly the teacher observes that this is a consequence of being watched through the centuries by people who think they are better than 'us': Austrians, Hungarians, Venetian, etc. On describing two young soldiers, a Croatian and a Serb, guarding the monument of Gazi Mestan in Kosovo, West comments that these two have "been born under different flags and had to beat down a wall of lies before they could smile at each other" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 905). *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* has proved prophetic on numerous occasions in the past seven decades, and the (naive) hope of many people living now in what used to be the former Yugoslavia, is that it proves prophetic again, so that one day the opposing sides of Yugoslav conflicts 'beat down' that 'wall of lies' and smile at each other again.

The West's attitudes towards the Balkans are embodied in Constantine's German wife Gerda<sup>15</sup>, when she confronts Rebecca West during their visit to Skopje's gypsy quarter: "'I do not understand you, you go on saying what a beautiful country this is, and you must know perfectly well that there is no order here, no culture, but only a mish-mash of different peoples who are all quite primitive and low'" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 662). West tells 'Gerda' that the reason she finds Yugoslavia so interesting is precisely because there are so many remarkable and different peoples who regardless of long centuries of oppression, "had never forgotten their own souls [...] It is not even imaginable what they would have achieved, had they been given time to acquire the technique of self-government (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1100).

How Yugoslavs of that time received the common literary description of their own country is evident in West's description of a field trip to Kosovo Polje. Constantine (aka Stanislav Vinaver), who was in a very bad form tells Rebecca

---

<sup>15</sup> Gerda was Stanislav Vinaver's wife Elsa, who according to Rebecca West tried to commit suicide on more than one occasion because she was married to a Jew.

West that he will show her the church at Gračanica, but he does not believe she will understand it, and continues: "It is too difficult for you, we are too rough and too deep for your smoothness and your shallowness. That is why most foreign books about us are insolently wrong" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 835). As an example he uses John Gunther's *Inside Europe*, which he calls disgusting. Rebecca West responds by saying that maybe Gunther misinterpreted some things, but that the book itself is not bad, causing Constantine to shout out in rage: "Why should Western cretins drool their spittle on our sacred things?" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 836).

Upon the end of her journey West stays in Budapest for a couple of days. Here she finds people puzzled as to why she spent so long in Yugoslavia. On explaining that she found the country beautiful, she is told "Yes, I suppose it is, but then the people are such barbarians, the life is so savage, it is like going among animals." West recalls all the remarkable people she has met on the journey, and wonders if her counterparts were "singularly unfortunate" or "insanely delicate". (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1082), and concludes that "there is no absolution for the sins we have committed against the Slavs through our ineptitude" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1126).

Rebecca West called Yugoslavs "born and trained rebels. They cry out when they see a government as if it were a poisonous snake" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 195). On encountering a group of peasant women, West acknowledges the hardship of their lives, but exclaims: "I will eat my hat if these women were not free in the spirit" (West, [1941] 1993, pp. 327-8). She remarks that the difference between the West and the Slavs is that the Slavs believe that by adding good things to life, they will make this life better, whereas the Westerners believe that the way to make life better is to take bad things out

of it. But what Rebecca West mostly admires in Yugoslavs is their acceptance of death as an integral part of life. On the island of Rab, she observes local women sitting in the cathedral's square, and makes a connection to the Pieta above the cathedral door, who looks like these women, with her stiff spine and her chin held high, she holds her dead son in her arms: "This Madonna is as sorrowful as sorrow, her son is dead as death. There is here the fullest acceptance of tragedy, there is no refusal to recognise the essence of life, there is no attempt to pretend that the bitter is sweet" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 132). In another instance, when visiting the sister of Čabrinović, the young man who made the first (unsuccessful) attempt on the life of Franz Ferdinand of Austria, West finds herself looking at the photograph of his dead mother, to what *Constantine*, her guide, explains: "It's the habit of our people to take photographs of their beloveds not only at weddings and at christenings, but in death too, we do not reject them in their pain." Rebecca West finds this to be a real division between Yugoslav and English people, the refusal of the English and the West, to look at death and consider it as an unavoidable part of life experience: "To be afraid of sorrow is to be afraid of joy" (West, [1941] 1993, pp. 419-420).

West's world vision<sup>16</sup> was based on the Freudian idea of *Eros* - the sexual drive and creative force, and *Thanatos* - the death drive and destructive force. In Yugoslavia, West found the country where these two basic drives were out in the open, perpetually pulling the land and its people apart. Nowhere is her opinion as evident than when she writes that: "Only part of us is sane; only part of us loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to our nineties and die in peace, in a house that we built, that shall shelter those who come after us. The other half of us is nearly mad. It prefers the

---

<sup>16</sup> In 1927 Rebecca West underwent psychoanalysis. It was around this time that West became influenced with the Freudian theory of *Eros* and *Thanatos*.

disagreeable to agreeable, loves pain and its darker night despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set life to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1102).

The motifs of a black lamb and a grey falcon are connected to this world vision. A black lamb appears a number of times throughout the book, most significantly at the sacrificial rock in Macedonia where barren women and infertile men attend the sacrifice of a lamb in order to restore their fertility. It signifies 'death in life', the violence of birth and the forces of destruction. West describes the fertility rock as "red-brown and gleaming, for it was entirely covered with the blood of the beasts that had been sacrificed". She then, introduces a young gypsy that approaches the rock carrying a lamb in his arms. He hands the lamb to a man seated on the rock. Next, he brings a young child, about eighteen months old and lifts her to the rock. The knife is drawn across the lamb's throat and the child is anointed with the lamb's blood. West is appalled by this act as in her mind's eye it perpetuates an idea that one has to suffer in order to obtain goodness. She exclaims: "I knew this rock well. I had lived under the shadow of it all my life. All our Western thought is founded on this repulsive pretence that pain is the proper price of any good thing" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 827).

The grey falcon symbolises life after death. West describes how the grey falcon appears to the Serbian Tsar Lazar before the battle of Kosovo in 1389 and promises him [access to] the kingdom of heaven in return for death on the battlefield. Tsar Lazar, according to the legend, decided for the kingdom of Heaven, which will last "forever and ever" and perishes on the battlefield. "We die with Christ, to live forever", he told his soldiers. This battle, that the Serbs lost, was the start of five hundred years of Ottoman oppression of the



Balkans. The legend of Tsar Lazar was resurrected again, six hundred years later, in 1989, to instigate anti-Muslim sentiments in Serbs towards their Albanian neighbours in Kosovo. Both the black lamb and grey falcon symbolise a mistaken belief that the innocent should sacrifice themselves in order for good to prevail over evil; and gives West two main symbols on which she anchors the idea that pacifism is not an answer, in situations where the forces of evil (Nazis), will prevail if the 'good people' do nothing to defend themselves. Brian Hall (1996) calls West's *Epilogue* in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, the best war propaganda ever written. In conclusion to her epilogue, West writes that if "there is but one human being born in every generation who will not cease to inquire into the nature of his fate, even while it strips and bludgeons him, some day we shall read the riddle of our universe... we shall find out why we draw the knife across the throat of the black lamb or take its place on the offensive rock, and why we let the grey falcon nest in our bosom, though it buries its beak in our veins" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1013).

For Rebecca West the Balkans were not just a place to visit; she felt the urge to shine a light on Yugoslavia, so the rest of the world could understand which historical forces forged the area into what it is. It is important to observe that *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is neither a balanced nor an objective account of Yugoslavia. West tends to project her own frustrations onto the history she encounters. She seems to exaggerate in parts. For example, when she describes the Uskoks (Croatian pirates) she writes how "they would knife a living enemy, tear out his heart, and eat it" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 127). West takes care that in the cases where she is prejudiced and biased she explains why this is so, if she gets angry, she tries to explore the source of these feelings both to herself and to her readers. In a letter to her

friend Alexander Woollcott, playwright and actor, West wrote: "The Yugoslavian book now seems to me a prenatal event in my life. Why I should be moved in 1936 to devote the following 5 years of my life, at great financial sacrifice and to the utter exhaustion of my mind and body, to take an inventory of a country down to its last vest-button, in a form insane from any ordinary artistic or commercial point of view - a country which ceases to exist? I find the hair raising on my scalp at the extraordinary usefulness of this apparently futile act" (West, 2000, p. 169).

West said that there was a "lot of emotion loose about in the Balkans" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 687) and that she had always found it a "waste of time to try to imagine beforehand anything that Yugoslavia was going to offer me" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 813). She hated leaving the country she felt so at home in, because "Everything seemed stupid and superfluous after Yugoslavia" (cited in Rollyson, 1995, p. 161). When researching her life and work, one realises that there was a lot of emotion loose in Rebecca West, and her audience should not waste much time in trying to imagine beforehand, what idea or thought, she is going to present them with next. If Rebecca West was a country, she would have been Yugoslavia.

## Two Vagabonds in the Balkans

*When you have been thrust out of the train at midnight into the blackest gloom, on to what you must believe to be a station platform from the behaviour of your fellow passengers rather than from any visual deduction, since no gleam of lamp relieves the darkness; when you have, undisturbed by importunity of porter, dragged your bags and packages from the train, lowering them on to ground which, though invisible, feels greasy with thick mud under the boot; when you have in the panicked bewilderment taken a dozen of steps into the darkness - vaguely hoping that information of some sort will be discovered in any other spot than the one where you are at the moment - only to be tripped up, floundering down into a squad of now expostulating and quite perceptively odorous soldiers, who were formerly snoring upon their backs at full length on the platform; when you have tried French, German, Serb, and blasphemy without getting answer good or bad from anybody, you may be pardoned if you judge that you have arrived somewhere near to the edge of civilisation, or at least not civilisation as we would understand it. Yet Brod station is technically well within European soil lying west of the longitude of Budapest, and north of the latitude of Genoa or Bordeaux.*

Cora Gordon and Jan Gordon (1926)

The travel writers Cora and Jan Gordon were a cultural phenomenon of their time. They were a precursor to what is known today as backpackers, travelling by foot, bicycle, motorbikes and public transport through Europe and America. Gordons traveled on a shoestring budget, producing numerous travel books that they wrote and illustrated together, under often humorous titles such as *Poor Folk in Spain* (1922) (by 'poor folk' they meant themselves), *Misadventures with a Donkey in Spain* (1925), *Stardust and Hollywood* (1930),

and many more. This independent travelling on a modest budget is what sets their journey apart from Rebecca West's, who a decade later travelled through Yugoslavia in first class train carriages, or was driven by a chauffeur while guided through the country by a government official Stanislav Vinaver (Constantine). The Gordons stayed with local village people, often very poor hosts, food was very scarce and their diet consisted mostly of boiled eggs and spit-roasted mutton, which they grew to hate with venom. They however do not travel light and describe the luggage they carried with them to the Balkans as a library of books, two musical instruments, and a stock of oil colours enough to last them for two years.

They liked that local people did not pay them much heed, unlike Spain where they were both observing and being intensely observed by locals in return. In Bosnia, they "could be diverted optically with as little disturbance as in a picture gallery or a cinematograph" (Gordon and Gordon, 1925, pp. 38-39). The Gordons compare travelling to an "optical orgy, a veritable Roman feast for the eyesight" and "the first confession of aristocratic desires" (Gordon and Gordon, 1925, p. 86). As mentioned earlier in the text, the Gordons believed that to watch others is aristocratic, on the other hand to feel, taste, smell, to rub shoulders with others and to find pleasure in this, "is purely democratic and is the rarest humour to find in the world" (Gordon and Gordon, 1925, p. 88).

Admittedly the Gordons do their best to rub shoulders with 'the others' through choosing to stay in places not many people visit, in makeshift bedrooms, using their Burberry raincoats as a blanket and all their wits to source any other kind of food bar greasy mutton, that they felt the whole of Bosnia smelt of. They see their duty as one that only a foreigner can carry out,

and this is "to make a note of all those small peculiarities which would most easily be overlooked by a man in his own country, because he cannot realise them as peculiar." This outsider account of places and countries is essential in order to "reconstruct a true picture of any country at any time" (Gordon and Gordon, 1925, p. 91). For example, on the train to Iliđža they find a perfect example of Sarajevo's demographic diversity: peasants in traditional costumes, veiled Muslim women, a girl wearing a "French child's costume of silk", a Jewish family, a Serbian soldier and a Catholic priest, all traveling in the same carriage. At the mouth of the River Bosna they see Muslim women raise their veils to drink some beer and are surprised to discover that these women do not look Eastern at all but have "Slavic faces tinged with the German, faces which would seem more suitable upon the hockey field than in the still romantically seeming - but in reality quite prosaic - recesses of the harem" (Gordon and Gordon, 1925, p. 74).

Many similar motifs occur in *Two Vagabonds in the Balkans* and in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. In a waterfall mill in Bosnia, both the Gordons and West encounter a sleeping man, who gives Rebecca West "a smile dazzling in its suggestion that we are all accomplices" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 433). Both the Gordons and West meet their share of angry young Balkan men. The Gordons meet theirs in the town of Konjić, Bosnia, describing one of them: "smoking with revolution, drums and trumpets were in his voice, his innuendos masked batteries of cannon. Reduced to pure fact, he said that the Serbs were absorbing all the Government posts, that Serbian students were favoured for degrees, and that the Catholics were being deliberately ousted and crushed" (Gordon and Gordon, 1925, p. 191). West meets at least three angry young men on her travels. When describing the one she encounters on a steamer to the island of Korčula, who complained about

being sick of constant talk of politics, she writes: "He was as angry as the young man who had been angry with the gardener at Trsat, or the other who had been angry with the cold soup on the boat to Rab" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 199) which prompts West to conclude that South Slavs are "born and trained rebels" and in essence "the children of free cities" that cannot be shoehorned into any plausible form of modern state (West, [1941] 1993, p. 195).

Both the Gordons and West describe a very peculiar costume worn by Muslim women in Mostar. The Gordons call it the strangest garment they ever saw in Europe, and conclude that it must have been originally a full skirted cape "with sleeves and a high Incroyable collar; but fashion has gradually forced the cloak upwards, so that what was once the neck band now encircles the crown of the head, the sleeves float uselessly from the region of the ears, and the veiled face is fixed in a meagre orifice contrived between what used to be the first and second buttons of the cloak. The high collar stands up above the head and pokes forward somewhat like a chimney cowl; indeed one could well expect to see it swing about with a change of wind" (Gordon and Gordon, 1925, p. 204). West's description is more poetic and she uses the costume to describe the relationship between sexes. According to West, this unusual costume presents the female in a sinister light, the way men see women when they fear them: "The dark visor gives her the beak of bird of prey, and the flash of gold thread within the collar suggests private and ensnaring delights" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 292).

*Two Vagabonds in the Balkans*, is a light-hearted description of the places the Gordons visited. There are many misspellings in the book, starting from the name of the country, continuously spelled Jugo-Slavija. They keep wrongly

referring to Sarajevo as Serbian and that it is bathed in Adriatic sun, when the Adriatic Sea is 200 kilometres away. On arriving in Mostar Jan Gordon expresses his dismay because the tower he imagined before his arrival was much smaller in reality, the famous bridge was not as dreamy as he had hoped, the bazaar not as interesting as he thought and concludes by saying that: "The imaginative man must *not* go to places of which he has dreamed. We found Sarajevo unexpectedly, it was delight. I had imagined a Mostar, it was disappointment" (Gordon and Gordon, 1925, p. 194). The beautiful town of Korčula is too beautiful, almost artificially so and the small villages they so crave to discover belong to the Middle Ages with their dirt and backwardness. What is striking to notice is that they are never satisfied. However, to their credit, the Gordons do ask themselves why they went to "Jugo-Slavija" instead of exploring the wonderful countryside of France or Austria, and conclude, honestly and with humour, they went to Yugoslavia because they were seeking discomfort.

Although *Two Vagabonds in the Balkans* stands far apart in execution and effort from West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, what is common to both is a very fast language with curious absence of comas, that produces writing that could be described as almost breathless. Thoughts, ideas descriptions and dialogues, just roll on top of each other like an avalanche, making one wonder: does the Balkans make a person an impatient and hyper writer?

## An encounter that never took place

*The road is wider than long  
trees are thicker than tall  
wells reach to the clouds  
their blood is more solid than their bones*

Ronald Penrose (1938)

Rebecca West's final trip to Yugoslavia commenced on the 27 April 1938 in Skopje, Macedonia. She stayed in possibly the only decent hotel in town, the same one that, presumably, the British surrealist artist, Roland Penrose and his then lover and later wife, photographer Lee Miller stayed in a couple of months later. The result of Penrose's travels was *The Road Is Wider Than Long: An Image Diary from the Balkans July - August 1938*. Penrose's Balkans in contrast to West's appears more like an invented place, a dreamland, but there is a similarity in tone. According to Peter D. Osborne, in his book *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel and Culture*, for the surrealist, travel was a method of encountering "some kind of otherness" that will destabilise them and transform them (Osborne, 2000, p. 82). Although it would be far fetched to think of West as a surrealist, this is the exact affect that her travels in Yugoslavia had on her, it was transformative, and it helped her crystallise her ideas on pretty much everything. *The Road Is Wider Than Long*, differs from most travel books because it is non-sequential and non-narrative. As Ian Walker points out, "We are constantly thrown around in space and time, with broken fragments of text placed next to ambiguous images, so that what we



end up with is not a guide, but an evocation, a reverie, even" (Walker, 2007, p. 84). These time and space jumps are also quite characteristic of West's writing in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, and quite important in the way in which they emulate how memory works. She travels through space and time and switches swiftly between the motifs. One moment she is describing a complex historical background to the current situation in Old Serbia (Kosovo) and in the next moment she is skipping through the fields of wild flowers in search of bluebells. West uses this as a deliberate strategy in order to make more demands on her audience's powers of concentration: "To get them to go the way I wanted them I deliberately gave the story the loose attractiveness of various pleasant things in life [...] Again and again I broke sequences and relaxed tension to get the lethargic attention of the ordinary reader along the road" (cited in Jacobs, 2004, p. 16).

Memory is not linear; it is probably more like an extremely complex ant colony, in which all is connected and reassembled according to need. In *The Road Is Wider Than Long*, the viewer experiences a delayed effect. Upon first inspection, the work seems too fragmented; but then, after being stored in one's memory for a number of days or weeks, Penrose's poems and images start reconnecting, now freed from their original layout, and creating a more lasting impression upon the viewer's psyche.

Rebecca West returned to Yugoslavia in 1938 on her own, with the intention to write 'on the spot' as she felt a great need to capture a world that was about to disappear. Roland Penrose went to the Balkans on a romantic journey with his new love Lee Miller and he created *The Road Is Wider Than Long*, as a sort of love letter to Lee Miller and an attempt to immortalise the first tentative steps in their love affair. West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*

was a love letter to Yugoslavia. Writing to her husband in the early summer of 1938, she wonders, "can there be more than 25000 words to the damn thing?" (West, 2000, p. 166). Little did she know that the book she was writing would swell into twenty times that amount, and become in her own words an "inventory of a country down to its last vest-button" and a beautiful memory of the land that was.

# Chapter 3: Yugoslavia's violent end, an odd chain of influences and another fool in the Balkans

## Yugoslavia's violent end

*Violence was, indeed, all I knew of the Balkans: all I knew of the South Slavs.*

Rebecca West (1941)

*... this amazing peninsula, so kindly favoured by nature and so cruelly mutilated by history...*

Leon Trotsky (1912)

In many ways *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* was a prophetic book. Reading West's remark today: "It is the habit of the people, whenever an old man mismanages his business so that it falls to pieces as soon as he dies, to say, 'Ah, so-and-so was a marvel! He kept things together so long as he was alive, and look what happens now he has gone!'" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 10), one cannot help but think of Josip Broz Tito's death in 1980, and the unfortunate chain of events that took place after it. Fifty years after *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon's* 1941 publication, Yugoslavia erupted in a series of wars that quickly turned into the worst violence in Europe since the Second World War.

Tito's Yugoslavia enjoyed its golden age between the early 1960s and the early 1980s. It had a relatively high standard of living, fast national growth

rate, low unemployment, equal pay for women, free medical care and education, subsidised public transport and property rents, etc. Josip Broz Tito famously described himself as the leader of one country which has two alphabets, three languages, four religions, five nationalities, six republics, surrounded by seven neighbours, a country in which live eight ethnic minorities. Yugoslavia, a socialist federation composed of six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia) and two autonomous provinces (Vojvodina and Kosovo), started falling apart at the seams after his death in 1980.

Tito's death coincided with another destabilising factor: the collapse of communism and the awakening of nationalism in Eastern Europe. Emerging political parties and their leaders, used nationalism and the accompanying rhetoric in order to develop a culture of fear and mistrust between different ethnic groups in Yugoslavia. Misha Glenny, possibly the best-known writer on Yugoslavia, filed a report in February 1991 to the BBC, in which he wrote that the leaders of Yugoslavia "were stirring a cauldron of blood that would soon boil over." He was reprimanded by his supervisors at the BBC for being an alarmist and told that "this is the end of the 20th century, not the beginning... there would be no war in the Balkans" (Glenny, 1999, p. 634). Unfortunately they were wrong. As well as creating a culture of fear and mistrust, the obliteration of the Yugoslav identity, common to all ethnic groups, started in earnest on all sides. Describing how this process worked in Croatia, Dubravka Ugrešić wrote that it took only five years of repressive measures "to create the first precondition for the final idiotization of the nation" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 210). That precondition, she said, was a collective amnesia which caused its citizens to forget:

both their own personal history and history in general. They have burned their party membership cards, thrown their own aunt from Smederevo (a town in Serbia) on the rubbish heap - some have done this with their Serbian husbands, wives and other relatives - they have forgotten that they were ever in the partisans (that is, today is better to have had a father who was an Ustasha, a Second World War one), they have forgotten all they said, did and wrote before, they have forgotten all they ever learned, they have forgotten their former life. And the only thing they can do now is to be born again, this time in the new Croatian state. This means that the citizens of Croatia are now just five years old. Behind them lies a past that has been wiped out, and before them... An even better future (Ugrešić, 1999, pp. 210-211).

The Yugoslav conflicts started in 1991 when Slovenia decided to leave the Yugoslav federation. This provoked a ten-day military intervention by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). Due to its short durations, the number of casualties was relatively low. The Slovenes came out of this fight victorious. Considering that the Yugoslav National Army was one of the largest European armies at that time, Slovenia's victory can be attributed to their geographic position (it bordered three EU countries: Italy, Austria and Hungary) and the fact that Croatia, the much larger republic holding the majority of the Yugoslav coastal waters, declared independence on the same day as Slovenia.

Unfortunately, Croatia was not to be as 'lucky' as Slovenia. Frightened by the new and extremely nationalist Croatian government, the large Serb minority in Croatia, supported by the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), rebelled against the new Croatian state and took control of over a third of Croatia's territory. This independent Serbian territory within Croatia's borders was named Srbska Krajina. The campaign of ethnic cleansing started in the occupied parts of the country, and the JNA, supported by the Serbian paramilitary forces, started a

campaign of the systematic shelling and destruction of cities such as Vukovar and the ancient UNESCO-protected city of Dubrovnik. In 1995, tables turned - in two major military offensives - 'Storm' and 'Flash' - the Croatian army reclaimed most of its lost territory. This triggered an exodus of ethnic Serbs, as well as a series of war crimes committed by the Croatian army towards the Serbian civilians.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, the most ethnically diverse republic in former Yugoslavia, was almost completely devastated in the war. Both Serbia and Croatia had strategic interest in Bosnian territory and it has come to light that Croatian president Franjo Tudjman and Serbian president Slobodan Milošević met secretly in 1991 and carved up the country between them. The Bosnian government unfortunately placed their faith in an international community, as they believed that the international community would not allow a UN member state to be wiped off the map. The population of Bosnia learned over time that peaceful negotiations with their Serb and Croat counterparts had brought them only defeat. So they started to fight back. War then turned into a vicious three-sided battle. The Bosnian government pleaded with The Security Council to lift the arms embargo so they could defend themselves. This was refused with the argument that this would only create a "level killing fields". More honest reason was provided by James Baker, the Secretary of State under President George Bush, when he said: "We don't have a dog in that fight" (cited in Silber & Little, [1996] 1997, p. 29-30). As a consequence of not lifting the arms embargo, Bosnian Muslims were exposed to a merciless ethnic cleansing from both the Serbian and the Croatian side.

It is difficult to estimate the exact numbers of people that were killed in the Bosnian war. This number ranges anywhere between 25,000 - 250,000, depending on the source. What we do know is that half of the population either fled, were killed or expelled (approximately two million people). Thousands of women were raped; concentration camps were resurrected and mass murder on the scale not seen in Europe since the Second World War took place in the town of Srebrenica in July 1995. More than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men were executed by the Serb forces, under the command of General Ratko Mladić, within a space of just a few days. Srebrenica, declared a safe area by the UN and under the guard of Dutch peacekeeping forces, was 'cleansed' of Muslims in less than a week, while the UN peace forces powerlessly looked on.

While the international community tried to decide on how they should act, the Bosnians were thrown into turmoil. The feeling of helplessness amongst the Bosnian Muslims was especially vast and echoed very well in Slavenka Drakulić's book *Balkan Express: Fragments From the Another Side of War* (1993) when she describes her reaction to the first air raids. Even though Drakulić describes air raids in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, the experience is recognisable to the majority of the people who find themselves under attack: "At that point, I understood exactly the meaning of destiny. It is when you know that this is it: there is no choice any more, no solution, no escape, and you are not even horrified, not even tempted to resist, but just ready to take whatever the next moment brings. Even if it brings death" (Drakulić, 1993, p. 24). When reading this, it is hard not to think of a video footage that resurfaced in 2005, which showed Muslim boys who were executed a decade earlier, by their Serbian captors (in Potočari). In this video footage we see the scenes depicting a beautiful sunny day, we see Serbian soldiers chatting to

each other in a field of tall grass and wild flowers, about what they are going to do that night, are they going out for a drink, or off to meet their girlfriends. The teenage Muslim boys are being brought one by one into the field, where these same 'benevolent' soldiers gun them down, as a comma perhaps to their conversation. The Muslim boys don't plead for their life, they do not protest, they are not crying. They step calmly in front of their executors and their young lives are taken away from them in an instant. Death is silent.

The Srebrenica massacre changed the NATO's policy of non-involvement. Soon after the events in July 1995, a major air strike offensive started against the Bosnian Serbs and together with a joint Bosnian and Croatian offensive, Bosnian Serbs were pushed back from a third of the territory they occupied. Subsequently, more than 60,000 of the NATO troops were deployed in the area.

Still, this was not the end. In 1999 the war moved to the Serbian province of Kosovo, where the Albanian population sought independence from Serbia. The Serbs attacked Albanian towns and villages, targeting predominantly the civilian population and forcing them to flee. After peace talks failed, NATO went on a 78-day air strike offensive against Serbs both in Kosovo and in Serbia. According to The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), an estimated 750,000 Albanian refugees returned home, while around 100,000 Serbs fled Kosovo in fear of retribution. Even fifteen years on, the situation today is still very tense and unresolved.

Montenegro that was part of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro until 2006 was considered to be partly responsible for the events mentioned above.



Macedonia— or as it is formally known "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM), due to its name dispute with Greece— still manages to avoid conflicts, although the tension between Macedonians and Macedonian Albanians is a tinder box waiting to go off. If this happens, the war might spread outside of the borders of former Yugoslavia, and pull in Albania, Bulgaria and Greece. Today, we can see that the NATO forces are strategically moving into the area.

The term Balkan or 'to balkanise' (in this case meaning to fragment and revert back to a 'primitive' and 'savage' state) became firmly associated with Yugoslavia around this time. This has prompted Todorova to ask: "Why is it, then, that "Balkan" is used for a country at war that, before the sad events, insisted it was not Balkan but considered it to be the shining star of Eastern Europe by its Western supporters?" and continues: "It would do much better if the Yugoslav, not Balkan, crisis ceased to be explained in terms of Balkan ghosts, ancient Balkan enmities, primordial Balkan cultural patterns and proverbial Balkan turmoil, and instead was approached with the same rational criteria that the West reserves for itself" (Todorova, 2009, p. 186).

In her book *The Culture of Lies*, Dubravka Ugrešić observes that the international community saw the disintegration of Yugoslavia as a consequence of the collapse of communism, at its best. This association had positive connotations in the West.

Disintegration went along with democratisation. Proudly waiving its own unification, Europe supported disintegration in a foreign territory. Emphasising the principle of multiculturalism in its own territory, it abetted ethnic cleansing elsewhere. Swearing by European norms of honour, it negotiated with democratically

elected war criminals. Fiercely defending the rights of minorities, it omitted to notice the disappearance of the most numerous Yugoslav minority, the population of a national, 'nationally undetermined' people, or the disappearance of minorities altogether. When the war really flared, it was suddenly horrified at the bloodthirstiness of *tribal* account-settling and withdrew into a corner. And it immediately drew a border-line (*It's incomprehensible! Those must be ancient ethno-customs! These people are not like us!*). To start with many Europeans rushed into the polygon of the war (let us recall, among others, Lord Owen who sliced Bosnia into ethnically pure cantons with a surgeon's satisfaction) and then withdrew. Now they are writing their memoirs (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 247-248).

At its worst, it was seen as a battle of savages, or as the English military historian John Keegan observed, the Yugoslav war was a "primitive conflict that only anthropologists can understand" (1993).

The media coverage of the Yugoslav wars was based on generalisations about the people and their history. The clichés outlawed long ago when reporting from non-Western areas, were circulating freely in a majority of the news reports on the conflicts. As Misha Glenny comments, "the Balkans apparently enjoy a special exemption from the rules against stereotyping" (1999). For example, Tony Blair, made an infamous gaff in 1999 when he said that the Balkans are "on the doorstep of Europe" (cited in Glenny, 2002, p. xvii). This is to describe the country bordered on all sides by EU member states. The West saw the Yugoslav conflicts as unfathomable and its people motivated by mysterious ancient hatred and congenital bloodthirstiness, something that Glenny argues "is always invoked when the great powers seek to deny their responsibility for the economic and political difficulties that the region has suffered as a consequence of external interference" (Glenny, 1999, p. 661).

The Balkans were constructed as the Other within Europe. In the words of Slavoj Žižek, "In former Yugoslavia we are lost not because of our primitive dreams and myths preventing us from speaking the enlightened language of Europe, but because we pay in flesh the price for being the stuff the Other's dreams are made of... Far from being the Other of Europe, former Yugoslavia was rather Europe itself in its Otherness, the screen onto which Europe projected its own repressed reverse" (cited in Taylor, p. 132).

In his article 'The Bad Guy', Charles King (1999) writes about journalists *who* "poured into the Balkans, carrying with them Rebecca West's pre - World War II book *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*." It was possibly the most consulted secondary source for American and English journalists covering the conflicts of the 1990s (Hall, 1996 and Holbrooke, 1998, p. 22). When Geoff Dyer was sent to what was left of Yugoslavia in 1993<sup>17</sup>, he noted that "there have been many times when the scene unfolding before my eyes seemed to have been faithfully enacted from the pages of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*" (Dyer, 2006). The influence of Rebecca West's book on at least two generations of readers, politicians, diplomats and policy makers has been widely noted, but unlike many who commented on Yugoslavia, Rebecca West promoted the view that the Balkans belonged to Europe and that Europe was incomplete without it. She denounced the pervasive equation of Europe with Western Europe and she refused to see Yugoslavia as a link between civilisations and barbarism, unlike most of the people who came in following her footsteps.

---

<sup>17</sup> Like Rebecca West herself, Geoff Dyer was sent to Yugoslavia by the British Council.

## An odd chain of influences

*I would rather have lost my passport and money than my heavily thumbed and annotated copy of Black Lamb and Grey Falcon.*

Robert Kaplan (1993)

American writer Robert D. Kaplan has been described as a “world affairs expert” on the back-cover of his book *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (1990). Kaplan has a very influential readership that includes the likes of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. To his domestic reader Kaplan is known as one of the leading voices on the USA’s foreign policy issues, a peculiar fact as his understanding of history is weak and his knowledge about places he writes about - incompetent. In his article ‘Euphorias of Perrier: The Case Against Robert D. Kaplan’ published in the Summer issue of *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (2006), Tom Bissell writes: “Kaplan’s real and growingly evident problem is not his Parkinson’s grip on history, or that he is a bonehead or a warmonger, but rather that he is an incompetent thinker and a miserable writer” (Bissell, 2006).

Robert D. Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* was a homage to West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Kaplan’s, unfortunately widely acclaimed book, looks at Yugoslavia through the lens of West's book, insofar as that he, like West before him, considers the Ottoman rule as a period of darkness and allows himself, in the romantic manner of Rebecca West, to deduce the whole history of a nation just by looking at a piece of art. However, Kaplan's view of the Balkan people is not as accommodating as

West's. Instead *Balkan Ghosts* is a book littered with sweeping generalisations and wild and crude associations.

Darkness and a primitive mysticism, prevail in Kaplan's descriptions of the places he travels through. Kaplan's Balkans are violent. Astonishingly he claims in the prologue of *Balkan Ghosts* that Nazism can claim Balkan origins. "Among the flophouses of Vienna, a breeding ground of ethnic resentments close to the southern Slavic world, Hitler learned to hate so infectiously" (Kaplan, 1996 [1993], p. xxvii). Kaplan does not stop there; on the same page he writes that the Balkans produced the first terrorists:

IMRO (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation) was the Palestine Liberation Organisation of the 1920s and 1930s, with Bulgarian paymasters, dedicated to recovering the parts of Macedonia taken by Greece and Serbia after the Second Balkan War. Like the present-day Shiites of Beirut's southern suburbs, the IMRO's killers, who swore allegiance over a gun and an Orthodox Bible, came from the rootless, peasant proletariat of the Skopje, Belgrade and Sofia slums. Hostage taking and the wholesale slaughter of innocents were common. Even the fanaticism of the Iranian clergy has a Balkan precedent. During the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, a Greek bishop in Macedonia ordered the assassination of a Bulgarian politician and then had the severed head brought back to the church to be photographed (Kaplan, 1996 [1993], p. xxvii).

This paragraph is completely nonsensical and ill informed. Terrorism was not invented in the 20th century. It is as old as warfare. The sentence where he states that Iranian clergies' fanaticism has a Balkan precedent, and his proof for this (photographing severed head of a Bulgarian politician) is a wild association.

How *Balkan Ghosts* coloured the popular perception of the Yugoslav conflicts is evident in the endorsement Kaplan received from well-respected newspapers. For example, in *The New York Times* review of *Balkan Ghosts* (named 'A World Gone Raving Mad'), Istvan Deak writes that Kaplan's book "offers the reader an often delightful romp through the past and present politics of a region", whose countries form an "unhappy whole" and how "In describing life in these raw concrete structures, disfigured by graffiti and garbage, reeking of urine and cheap alcohol, Mr. Kaplan demonstrates his literary powers at their fullest". Deak explains that Kaplan made his book in a form of a travel memoir, as this was necessary to keep American readers interested, to teach people about history, art and politics, and that "a mix of personal and historical anecdotes was ideal for explaining a region where hatreds have been passed down over two millenniums" (Deak, 1993). This, and other similar write-ups by respected and widely consumed media outlets have done untold damage to the region.

According to the American political journalist Elizabeth Drew, Bill Clinton read Kaplan's book in 1993, before deciding not to lift the arms embargo on the Bosnian government. Clinton also withdrew the threats of air strikes on Serbs. He did this as *Balkan Ghost* convinced him that the inhabitants of Yugoslavia are hereditarily doomed to violence. These inactions left Bosnian Muslims largely defenceless and open to genocide by both the Serbs and the Croats. It also opened the doors for the Islamic extremist. Kaplan's portrayal of people locked into desperate conflicts since the fourteenth century, inspired by West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, left a lasting impression on the USA president (Drew, 1995). Clinton's reluctance to act, enabled the carnage to continue, causing thousands of people to perish or to be exiled from their homes; and as Hall comments "through an odd chain of

influence", *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, "helped insure that this disgraceful legacy would continue" (Hall, 1996).

In an attempt to waive off his responsibility, Kaplan laments these types of criticism in the foreword to the 1996 paperback edition: "That policy makers, indeed a president, might rely on such a book in reaching a momentous military decision would be frightening, if true. My personal suspicion is that back in 1993, at the beginning of his term, Clinton had so little resolve that he was casting around for any excuse not to act" (Kaplan, 1996, pp. x-xi).

Furthermore in Kaplan's letter to the editors of *The New York Review of Books*, his response to the article by Timothy Garton Ash titled 'Bosnia in Our Future', he acknowledges that it "is correct to suggest [NYRB, December 21, 1995] that many people who have cynically opposed forceful action in the Balkans have used my book, *Balkan Ghosts*, as ammunition." This however, Kaplan states was not his intention, as he advocated vigorously for strong military intervention against the Bosnian Serbs. Timothy Garton Ash's own response to Kaplan's letter was that "Having looked again at *Balkan Ghosts*, I feel confirmed in my judgment that the tone, language, and general thrust of its account of former Yugoslavia ('the landscape of atrocities', Bosnian villages 'full of savage hatreds, leavened by poverty and alcoholism') did lend colour and apparent credibility to the always widespread view that bloody ethnic conflict was endemic to the Balkans, and another round of bloodshed inevitable there" (Ash, 1996).

It is undeniable, that people new to the area, who read *Balkan Ghosts* might have been greatly influenced by this 'world affairs expert's' account of the Balkans as a place where everyone hates everyone else. Tom Bissell rightfully

points out that "The metaphysics of what makes people suddenly garrotte and rape their neighbours can be debated from now until the end of time, but to generalize so complacently gives hatred a mask that too many can hide behind" (Bissell, 2006). According to Kaplan, the atrocities and crimes committed in the Balkans were inevitable and unsurprising considering the ancient hatreds that rule the area. "One wonders why, then, those who were slaughtered didn't see it coming and get out" (Bissell, 2006). Kaplan's insensitivities were not reserved only for the Balkans. Bissell's look into Robert D. Kaplan's 'opus' provides some frightening insights, for example when he describes Kaplan's cold-hearted attitude towards the loss of civilian lives in Iraq. Kaplan's reaction to a Marine killing an Iraqi civilian is demonstrated in a following quote: "I felt bad for the marine who had fired the shot—any civilian would have felt bad for him, if he or she had experienced the complexity and confusion of this urban battle space" (cited in Bissell, 2006). Bissell responds by saying: "As for the dead Iraqi—tough luck, Ali. Next time don't be so pretentious" (Bissell, 2006).

Robert D. Kaplan's books are intended for untraveled Americans who need to be reassured that the countries beyond their borders are innately hostile. His work is a perfect tool for developing a culture of fear and mistrust towards others that is prevalent in the USA's recent history. Also, according to Bissell, Kaplan's books are very convenient for the right-wingers and for the "Policy-makers casting about for some troublesome new chimera to chase along the crags before the next electoral cycle?" (Bissell, 2006).

Lene Hansen, who writes in her *Security as Practice* about how *Balkan Ghosts* influenced Clinton into not acting sooner in Bosnia, comments that unlike the proud, poetic and handsome Yugoslav people of West's *Black Lamb and*



*Grey Falcon*, Kaplan's Balkan men were signified by drunkenness and pornography as a "valuable way of separating 'the Balkans' from 'the West'" (Hansen, 2006, p. 152); for example, when describing villages around Sarajevo, Kaplan comments that they are "full of savage hatreds, leavened by poverty and alcoholism" (Kaplan, 1993, p. 22). Kaplan deepens this argument by writing that in the Balkans the distinction between superstition and idolatry is blurred in a morass of "dogma, mysticism, and savage beauty" (Kaplan, 1993, p. xxii).

If West lived to read Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, she would unlikely approve of it. Not only did Kaplan turn her handsome and proud Slavs into drunken men obsessed with pornography, but also described West in a particularly offensive way: "The fussiness and creativity of an accomplished cook and embroiderer, combined with the earthy sensitivities of a countrywoman and soon-to-be a grandmother, were undoubtedly necessary characteristics to enable Dame Rebecca to reel in the thoughts, passions, and national histories of Europe and Asia, and to remake them into a coherent, morally focused tapestry" (Kaplan, 1993, pp. 7-8).

Kaplan's style of travel writing is akin to someone putting a paper bag over their head, filled with stereotypes and prejudices of the worst kind. He cannot see past these, nor does he attempt to. He is never self-reflective. Is American history not drenched in the blood of its native peoples, steeped in a mythology that glorifies and is prone to violence? "With the ease with which American journalists dispense accusations of genocide in Bosnia, where the reported casualty figures vary anywhere from 25,000 to 250,000" comments Todorova, "it is curious to know how they designate the over three million dead Vietnamese. Whether the Balkans are non-European or not is mostly a

matter of academic and political debate, but they certainly have no monopoly over barbarity" (Todorova, 2009, p. 7).

The main problem with Robert Kaplan is not whether his writing is good or bad, but his bigotry, his flippancy, shallowness and refusal to properly research his subjects and honestly engage with the people he is writing about. This, coupled with the influence he exerts and because he is taken seriously by the people who are in the position of power, makes Robert Kaplan a very dangerous writer.

## Another Fool in the Balkans

*Another Fool in the Balkans: in the footsteps of Rebecca West* was published in 2006. Tony White, its author, is a British novelist whose relationship with *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* started around the time he curated *Walk to Belgrade from London on a Treadmill* (1994) by the Yugoslav performance artist Gordana Stanišić. In order to understand more of what was happening in Stanišić's former country, he decided to read Rebecca West's detailed account of her journey through Yugoslavia. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* inspired him to undertake his own journey and write his own, well-researched and politically impartial account of the people and places he experienced.

In White's opinion "any writer visiting the former Yugoslavia is following in the footsteps of Rebecca West" (White, 2006, p. 49). White, however, makes a conscious decision not to "shadow Rebecca West's ghost on its travels", as he believes that an expedition of that magnitude would be exhaustive and impossible, even if the country she visited still existed today. Another reason why he decided not to retrace the journey exactly was because he thought it would never do West justice and it could completely miss the point, which in his case is to "describe, through travelogue and through interviews with anyone but politicians and official spokespeople, some of the things that are happening in a cluster of relatively young republics that are emerging from a collective nightmare" (White, 2006, p. 49).

When writing about Rebecca West's views on the Balkans he acknowledges that her opinions were quite strong and continues: "Strong opinions might seem like quite old-fashioned things to have these days" (White, 2006, p. 37). He admires the way West depicts the history of the southern Slavs through describing believable characters rather than simply reiterating places, peoples and dates. It is West's understanding of human nature and how it is often governed by conflicting motivations, and also her acknowledgement that people sometimes behave against their best interests that in White's opinion "gives her own portraits a three-dimensionality that is truly magnificent" (White, 2006, p. 170).

Tony White's views echo West's when he writes that "'Balkanism', as this field of study is known, suggests, or manifests, that the collective self-image of 'civilised' or 'western' cultures (the two terms being used synonymously by those cultures, it is suggested, to maintain a justification for their position of power) is in part actually defined against a necessarily barbaric or at the very least exotic other; that a barbaric 'other', against which Western Europe can claim to measure its own progress, continues to be a necessary incident in the formation of western Europe's sense of itself as a civilised region. For many, the Balkans have provided, and continue to provide this prop" (White, 2006, pp. 33-34). He summons the reaction of many former Yugoslavs to this well established Western prejudice, by quoting Bosnian writer Miljenko Jergović: "The beauty of Paris or London is only an alibi for the criminals who have allowed ... Vukovar and Sarajevo to disappear" (cited in White, 2006, p. 34). Slavenka Drakulić, a Yugoslav writer living in self-exile, also writes on this in her book *Balkan Express: Fragments From The Another Side of War* (1993). Drakulić alludes that the concept of 'otherness' provided the West with a license to turn a blind eye to the atrocities that happened in her former

country; and continues: "... someone is always a Jew. Once the concept of 'otherness' takes root, the unimaginable becomes possible" (Drakulić, 1993, p. 3).

*Another Fool in the Balkans* counteracts Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*. Even the book's title is self-deprecating and acknowledges the fact that there will be no significant revelations between its covers. Tony White does not impose himself as an authority on the area, even if his knowledge is extensive. He is neither judgmental nor condescending. Instead of dwelling upon the past conflicts, he looks at the present situation through the eyes of people he meets on his journey, primarily artists. White's book does not look upon former Yugoslavs disparagingly, but with understanding that manages to capture the confusion, pride (or loss of it), courage and idealism of the people he encounters.

He calls Kaplan's opinions in the introduction to *Balkan Ghosts* astonishingly 'Balkanist', especially when Kaplan suggests that Nazism can claim Balkan origins. This, White claims would have infuriated Rebecca West, as it is completely contrary to her own experience of Yugoslavia. In a personal conversation with Tony White (January 2013), he stressed that he did his utmost to avoid the cheap gags and prejudices about the area, present in the works of such writers as Kaplan, when he decided to look into the countries that emerged out of the former Yugoslavia.

Interesting insight into the present situation is gained through White's interviews with people he meets along the road. Looking at the isolation of Serbia and the country's difficult image, both outward towards the rest of Europe and the World and also its self-image, he quotes Serbian artist Ivan

Grubavon who says: "Previous generations had no idea about real life, no space for making choices at all. The next generations were totally unprepared and just fled. My generation had to grow up in this, we were too young to do anything else, so we grew up with all that media manipulation, which led to a country that publicly at least had no faith in anyone but themselves, and no desire to be accepted or approved; quite the opposite" (White, 2006, p. 230).

One of the most poetic understandings of the past, present and a very uncertain future of these new countries is illustrated by White's description of an imposing monument to the Partisans in the Croatian town of Rovinj. He sees a group of local children, no more than ten years old, in their colourful clothes playing football in the monument's perimeters. White realises that these kids never lived in Yugoslavia but were born in an independent Croatia, and continues: "The monument which was built to commemorate, and to sanitise the myths about the sacrifices that were made to create a country that no longer exists, means no more to them than any other conveniently flat playing surface. They have a football and the stone screen depicting the heroic Partisans serves as their goal" (White, 2006, p. 193). This scene provides a view of the history as both obliterated and ever present.

The two books— *Balkan Ghosts* by Robert D. Kaplan and *Another Fool in the Balkans* by Tony White— although both inspired by Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* take a very different route when exploring the subject of the Balkans and the conflict in former Yugoslavia and they both arrive at a very different conclusions. Kaplan's Balkans is one without hope, even the sky smells foul, there is no solution and no way out. White's Balkans and its peoples, on the other hand, are survivors trying to make sense of the events that happened there in the past two decades and get to terms with their own

responsibilities. Out of death, comes life. Or as Rebecca West said: "Blood Flows, and life goes on" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 149).

## Chapter 4: Dubravka Ugrešić

*'I am a shipwreck, I come from Atlantis,' I say.  
'Ah well, some countries last as long as people...' Says Richard.*

Dubravka Ugrešić(1998)

In a research that looks predominantly at the representations of Yugoslavia in Rebecca West *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, and the far-reaching influences of this book, it might seem unusual to digress so much as to dedicate a whole chapter to Dubravka Ugrešić, a writer from the former Yugoslavia. This is done predominately to bridge the chapters talking about Yugoslavia from the point of view of the displaced outsider to that of exiled insiders, from the late 1930s to the 1990s, from Edwardian realism of West's writing to postmodernism, and from literature to the visual arts and specifically photography.

Although West and Ugrešić belong to different time periods<sup>18</sup> and to different cultures, there are many similarities between these two writers. Both Rebecca West and Dubravka Ugrešić are considered feminist writers who are not afraid of being critical and holding very strong opinions. Both women's existence was significantly marked by displacement. Interestingly, both were called witches. West's biographer Victoria Glendinning wrote that if Rebecca West had been a poor 17<sup>th</sup>-century woman, she would have been burnt as a witch, and West herself felt shunned like one. In a letter from 1973, she writes

---

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca West and Dubravka Ugrešić were born fifty-seven years apart, West at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Ugrešić at the end of the 1940s.



to Arthur Crook, the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement* that she always felt treated as a witch, "pelted out of the village with my broom-stick" and that her books were treated as "maleficent spells" (West, 2000, p. 439). Dubravka Ugrešić was labeled as one by the Croatian magazine *Globus* (first of many times), an event that started a media witch-hunt in the early 1990s and ended in the writer's exile.

## To Fly Alone

*Where do you come from?  
From Yugoslavia.  
Is there any such country?  
No, but that's still where I come from.*

On the 11th of December 1992, an article appeared in the weekly magazine *Globus* titled "Croatia's Feminists Rape Croatia." This article was accompanied by a chart that provided information about five female writers and journalists: Rada Iveković, Vesna Kesić, Jelena Lovrić, Slavenka Drakulić and Dubravka Ugrešić, and included their birthplaces, employment details, where they lived and their marital status. In this article they were called the "five witches", "a group of selfish middle-aged women who have serious problems with their own ethnic, moral, human, intellectual and political identity!" [...] "little girls of communism", who according to *Globus's* investigative team<sup>19</sup> came from "the families of informers, policemen, prison guards, diplomats, high Party and political functionaries." The fact that some of the women, who did get married, "in spite of their theoretical position and physical appearance", married Serbs was also mentioned as a significant detail. The women's criticism of the new nationalist governments was received with added hostility because of their gender. The term 'feminists' was used in a derogatory fashion, meaning not feminine, but masculine and as such capable of raping their 'motherland'. Dubravka Ugrešić's phone

---

<sup>19</sup> Cowardly, no one wanted to put his or her name on this embarrassing article.

number was published in an article by another paper, along with an obscene sexual characterisation of the writer, which resulted in numerous threatening and abusive phone calls. Consequentially, Dubravka Ugrešić, a well-known Yugoslav writer, left the country and is now living in Holland. Known abroad as one of the best Croatian writers, a label she does not appreciate, and a winner of many international literary prizes, Ugrešić's reputation "back home" is tainted accusations of treason.

Ugrešić addressed this unfortunate event in a brilliant collection of essays titled *The Culture of Lies* (1998):

My Croatian passport does not make me a Croatian writer. It is easiest and most profitable to be a national writer, particularly if the nation is small. I have chosen a less profitable way: I do not wish to belong to anyone, not to a people, nor a nation, nor a national literature. If I have to belong to someone, then it's to my readers. Wherever they may be. [...] A milieu which destroys books has no mercy toward their authors either. Several years ago, my (national) cultural milieu declared me a "witch" and burned me on a media pyre with undisguised glee. [...] Today, from the perspective of my nomadic-exile, I can only be grateful to my former cultural milieu. I invested my own money in the purchase of my broom. I fly alone" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 39).

Ugrešić's work today predominantly explores exile as a condition that in literature appears romantic in nature, but in reality is a traumatic and destabilising state of being. Her work also looks at the effects of exile on memory and at the consequences it has on her sense of identity. In Ugrešić's novel *The Ministry of Pain* (2005), the main character, Tanja Lucić, leaves her hometown of Zagreb for Holland to take up a position as a temporary lecturer in Yugoslav literature at the University of Amsterdam. Tanja recognises the ridiculousness of her situation early on; teaching a subject that no longer

existed to students who predominately came from the former Yugoslavia and who enrolled on the course for their convenience<sup>20</sup>. Tanja quickly abandons the curriculum and attempts to recreate the lost country by making her students remember stories about Yugoslavia. This is done in defiance of the governments of the new countries that came into being as a result of Yugoslavia's breakdown, who deprived their citizens of their right to remember. "With the disappearance of the country came the feeling that the life lived in it must be erased. The politicians who came to power were not satisfied with power alone; they wanted their new countries to be populated by zombies, people with no memory. They pilloried their Yugoslav past and encouraged people to renounce their former lives and forget them. Literature, movies, pop music, jokes, television, newspapers, consumed goods, languages, people - we were supposed to forget them all" (Ugrešić, 2008, p. 59).

With time, this digging and unearthing of their collective Yugoslav memory becomes a burdensome and traumatic activity that her students start to resent. One of the students, Igor, with whom Tanja develops a romantic relationship, asks whether she ever met any émigrés from the Second World War, like he did through his uncle in America. "It was like meeting ghosts. They go on and on about things that hadn't slightest relevance to our lives. It was their perception of time that did it. You change more than your space when you leave; you change your time, your inner time. Time in Zagreb is moving much faster now than your inner time. You're stuck back in your own time frame. I bet you think the war took place yesterday" (Ugrešić, 2005, p. 125). Here Ugrešić is voicing a concern that most exiles have, they ruminate on the history that placed them in this precarious position, while life 'back

---

<sup>20</sup> It was easy to enroll and it provided them with residency papers.

there' seems to be moving uninterrupted and at a much faster pace, leaving the exiled person feeling even more ostracised both from the place they inhabited in the past and from the time they belong to. This phenomenon invites a connection between the state of exile and photography. Both involve a two-way loss. Both seem to be stuck in the past, a time that has gone by and is unrecoverable. Thierry de Duve writes in his essay 'Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox', that if one looks at the photograph as a deadening artefact, "the photograph indicates that life outside continues, time flows by, and the captured object has slipped away" (Duve in Elkins, 2007, p. 110).

In the *Ministry of Pain*, Ugrešić is using the characters in the book to express her conflicting feelings about the condition of exile; from self-pity to resilience, from adaptability to homesickness, from the desire to remember to the desire to forget, creating a sagacious and insightful reflection on the condition of exile, on fragmented memories, and identity lost and refound. According to *Aamer Hussein*: "The novel's conclusion is a profound and beautiful meditation on lost homes and territories, on the broken syntax of memory, on the self-inventions of rehabilitated refugees and on the capability to return and find what we left behind. Above all, Ugrešić maps our ability to survive and to tell the stories of our survival, even when scarred and deprived by war and banishment of those myths we once claimed as signifiers of our identity" (Hussein, 2005).

## On Coming from Atlantis

*A whole country had been condensed into an encyclopaedia entry and, like Atlantis, moved into the Dictionary of imaginary places.*

Dubravka Ugrešić (1994)

*Was it really like that before? And who is speaking? I. Who am I? No one. I come from Atlantis. Atlantis does not exist. Therefore, I do not exist. If I do not exist, then how can what I am saying be taken as true?*

Dubravka Ugrešić (1999)

*The Culture of Lies* is a collection of essays that Ugresic has described as 'antipolitical' in her book's subtitle. Written between 1991 and 1996 they deal with issues that arose as a consequence of Yugoslavia's disintegration. The primary concern of these essays is the imposed collective amnesia that resulted in forgetting what they knew and remembering what they did not experience in the former Yugoslavia.

Time rolled up into a circle, and exactly fifty years later, in the ninth decade of the twentieth century, a new war begun. This time there were no 'wicked Germans, black fascists', the local participants divided the roles between themselves. Thousands of people lost their lives, homes, identity, children; thousands of people became émigrés, refugees and homeless in their own country. The war raged on all fronts, permeated all the pores of life, spilled out of the screens of televisions which were permanently on, out of newspaper reports and photographs. In

the fragmented country both real and psychological wars were waged simultaneously. Mortar shells, psychological and real, wiped out people, houses, cities, children, bridges, memory. In the name of the present, a war was waged for the past, in the name of the future, a war against the present. In the name of a new future, the war devoured the future. Warriors, the masters of oblivion, the destroyers of the old state and builders of new one, used every possible strategic method to impose a collective amnesia. The self-proclaimed masters of life and death set up the coordinates of right and wrong, black and white, true and false (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 6).

A curious and hard to comprehend phenomenon occurred during the re-emergence of these new and extremely nationalist states that rose from Yugoslavia's ashes. In a couple of short years the purist version of the Croatian language was (re)invented and centuries old expressions were resurrected. Dr. Franjo Tuđman, Croatia's first president, was one of the keenest inventors of this new/old language and Croatian citizens were expected to absorb it at a superhuman speed. There was even a proposal put to the Croatian parliament to introduce fines and prison terms to punish crimes committed against the Croatian language, for example when using foreign words. For the generation of Information Technology students in the early 1990s, these were particularly surreal times. One of the main dinner-party amusements, was reading from a then newly published book, written for the IT students by a linguist of this new/old language. The book was incomprehensible as Croatian words for keyboards, monitors, etc. did not exist previously. It is frightening to think that what was so ridiculously funny then, became everyday vocabulary within the space of just a couple of years. As well as acquiring this new/old language, many former Yugoslavs still remember the moment of realisation that somehow overnight they learned

exactly which name is Croatian, which Serbian and which Muslim.<sup>21</sup> This was not all, there were new street names to remember, new passports to make, new IDs. Everything was pouring into one's head simultaneously with the background orchestra of machine guns firing and bombs exploding, leaving the former Yugoslavs oblivious and not conscious of this rapid learning. They were concentrating too hard on surviving.

One of the most revelatory lessons of that period was that not only can memories be easily lost and misplaced but they can also be recalled in the most mysterious ways, with a frightening efficiency, even when you are not conscious you were in possession of this information beforehand. All this led to an even more profound realisation: one should not trust history. Rebecca West compared history to the "delirium of a madman, at once meaningless and yet charged with a dreadful meaning" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1114), while Ugrešić wrote that "If no one knows who they are any more, if everyone refuses to be what they are, if no one is what he is, in other words, that what happened did not actually happen at all" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 258).

It is difficult to understand how this process of simultaneous forgetting and remembering works. How did it happen so swiftly and seamlessly? Do people who stayed behind, live under a state of some collective hypnosis? The Serbian punk-rock band *Partibrejkers* sings: "Mi ne idemo nikud i ne radimo nista, Mi smo jedna velika hipnotisana gomila" ("We don't go anywhere, We don't do anything, We are one big hypnotized crowd"). As Jean Baudrillard said, when reality is gone, the hallucinations are the only way to feel alive (1993, p. 93).

---

<sup>21</sup> I was surprised to find out that my first name is Serbian. This provided me with a lot of problems during the war years.



Every new trauma seems to release trapped memories of the past, an antidote to the collective amnesia that seems to strike the Balkans twice in a century. It happened in 1991, and before that filthy years earlier, in 1941. Croatia's latest war veterans who are still protesting on Zagreb's Main Square, even now, because their army leaders were extradited to the International War Crime Tribunal in The Hague, accused of the crimes against humanity, are also being ignored by a majority of the passers by. Standing there in their frayed uniforms, faces withered from smoking and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, they can recognise that most of the people who walk past, want them gone, deleted from the country's recent history, as they too have become a reminder of Croatia's unpalatable past.

Ugrešić asks in *The Culture of Lies*, what happened to the largest minority in the former Yugoslavia, all those millions of people that declared themselves Yugoslavs by nationality, all the people who were children of mixed marriages<sup>22</sup>. Now they were all homeless, especially if they were reluctant, like Ugrešić herself, to suddenly become Croat or Serb or Macedonian, etc. She calls herself an ethnic 'bastard' or 'schizophrenic' and states that this "is my natural choice, I even consider it a sign of mental and moral health. And I know that I am not alone" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 270).

In the time of war, Ugrešić bravely attacked nationalism, calling it an ideology of idiots; a slightly nicer name for what is essentially fascism and also "a religious and therapeutic refuge" for "those who have nothing else" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 270). In an interview with Svetlana Boym, for *Bomb* magazine, Ugrešić points out that in the former Yugoslavia, ethnic identities were not suppressed but encouraged. Croatian children learned the Cyrillic alphabet,

---

<sup>22</sup> There were many mixed marriages in the postwar Yugoslavia, including my own parents.

Bosnian children learned about Macedonian folk traditions, Serbian children learned Slovenian dances, years were spent in school learning about the cultural histories of each nationality; so what was prohibited was not having an ethnic identity, but nationalism, that Ugrešić compares to a toothache and calls it "terribly boring because it sings the same song, always. However, at certain moments nationalism could become irresistibly attractive for the masses... Nationalism is also a collective therapy, it boosts individual and collective self-esteem. No wonder some propagators of nationalism, as well as war criminals, were psychotherapists, like Radovan Karadžić." Ugrešić also compares nationalism to a virus that is spread by the medical profession in order to benefit them and them only. "That is why, when the virus is gone, ordinary people claim they can't remember how it happened and why, and what's gotten into them" (Ugrešić, 2002).

There is, however, a natural enemy to the obliteration of memories, and that is nostalgia, something Ugrešić tackles knowingly in her essays. She speaks about a divide she feels between herself and her 'foreign' friends, a realisation that although she can talk to them about various topics and shared interests there is a space that cannot be shared or translated, "an experience which marked the shared life in a particular country, in a particular culture, in a particular system, at a particular historical moment. [...] That unknown space in us is something like a shared 'childhood', the warm territory of communality of a group of people, a space reserved for future nostalgia. Particularly if it should happen that this space is violently taken from us" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 220).

And in the former Yugoslavia this space was violently taken from 'us'. Nostalgia, this tricky antidote to forgetting was basically outlawed in 'our'

new countries. A couple of years before the outbreak of wars and the disintegration of the country (in 1989), Dubravka Ugrešić and the editors of the no longer existing *Start* magazine, Dejan Kršić and Ivan Molek, called for collaboration on a project titled the *Lexicon of YU Mythology*. This project was envisioned as a collection of vignettes on the popular culture of Yugoslavia that would provide an answer to the questions about Yugoslav identity. It seemed in the early 1990s, as Yugoslavia started falling apart, that this initiative would be seen as redundant and unnecessary. The Lexicon first began as an illustrated publication, with mainly non-expert contributors, and in 2001 it came to life once more as an Internet forum and a website. It proved to be one of the liveliest and earliest Internet forums in the region. The BBC Radio (2005) stated that the Lexicon of YU Mythology was more important for the establishment of the dialogue in the postwar times than any efforts of the politicians in the region. However, such initiatives were not welcomed in the new states. The term was coined: 'Yugo-nostalgia' and according to Ugrešić, this term "is used as political and moral disqualification. The Yugo-nostalgic is seen a suspicious person, a 'public enemy', a 'traitor', a person who regrets the collapse of Yugoslavia, a Yugo-nostalgic is the enemy of democracy. The term 'Yugo-nostalgia' belongs to the new terminology of war" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 231). Dubravka Ugrešić, labeled a high priestess, a witch, of this new and dangerous cult of Yugo-nostalgia, by the media, the government, the academic circle she belonged to, by her former friends and many others, understands only too well the price one has to pay in order to evoke forbidden memories.

Summarising the trends and tendencies in memory and history studies, Paula Hamilton noted that "all the major work that examines memory in relation to various national identities and pasts is by male historians who have not been

especially concerned with the gendering of memory, only with national non-sexed subjects" (cited in Popescu, 2007, p. 353). Popescu finds that Ugrešić's novels bridge this absence as "For centuries authoritative historiography has been done by men while women were relegated to the task of cultural memory transmission; those detailed customs and sagas of the group/ family belonged with kitchen tales while the scholarly work of history was the playground of men" (Popescu, 2007, p. 353).

In *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan Wars to the American Dream* (1994), Dubravka Ugrešić compares her experience of the United States to the happenings in war-torn Yugoslavia. Ugrešić writes from a perspective of a writer whose country and identity are being obliterated by war; her analysis, presented as a series of essays, is deadpan and highly perceptive. Her opinions on American culture are echoed later in her book *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1998), when Ugrešić writes: "The most powerful country in the world had the most fragile population, they were all falling apart, they were all in a state of permanent nervous breakdown. An infantile country, that's what it was, and they all needed a coach. A coach or a therapist, it didn't matter which" (Ugrešić, 1998, p. 121).

Robert Kaplan, the writer of *Balkan Ghosts*, the book that caused irrevocable damage to the area, commented on Ugrešić's *Have a Nice Day* and called it "a cynical and ironic description of the USA, written from a perspective of a foreigner whose society the United States did not manage to protect" (Kaplan, 1995). Kaplan, who does not hold back in expressing his prejudice and stereotypes about the countries and cultures he writes about, does not like this turning of tables. Ugrešić's sharp observations about his homeland are seen as the cynical descriptions of a frustrated victim. Kaplan puts himself,

unsurprisingly, into a superior position. Dubravka Ugrešić and her country, whatever that might be, are seen as someone or something that needs protecting. His arrogance and colonial attitudes come to the forefront here, as it is evident that he sees the United States as some kind of grand protector, a father-head country.

Ugrešić, does not only look at the USA, but also at all stereotypes she is confronted by on her travels in the West, in general:

I was used to foreigners asking me what it was like behind 'the iron curtain', telling me that they had been in my Yugoslavia and what a wonderful city our capital Budapest was" [These are common faux pas former Yugoslavs encounter without a fault. Yugoslavia, not a member of the Warsaw Pact, was never behind the Iron curtain] She continues: "I was used to Swedes telling me that our migrant workers kept pigs in their bathrooms, Germans telling me about the dirty lavatories and lazy waiters on the Adriatic coast, I was used to Parisians talking about the Yugomafia, and Londoners about 'ustashas' and 'chetniks', the fear of civilised Europe... Ha-ha, you're a dangerous lot, down there (Ugrešić, 1994, p. 28).

## Photography, Nostalgia's Secret Weapon

*'Refugees are divided into two categories: those who have photographs and those who have none,' said a Bosnian, a refugee.*

Dubravka Ugrešić (1998)

*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1998) follows a narrator, a 45-year-old woman from the former Yugoslavia who seems to be a fictionalised version of Dubravka Ugrešić herself<sup>23</sup>, trying to navigate her life in exile and come to terms with the fragmentation of memories, a result of losing her home, her job and her friends. The novel is a collection of numbered vignettes, photographic in their nature, and indeed photography takes the central stage in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. In her article 'Slavic Essayist Dreams of Communism and Joan Collins' Joy Press calls Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Culture of Lies* "two Barthesian collections of fragmented meditations on the collapse of Yugoslavia" (Press, 2003).

As a child, the narrator played a game where she and her friends would make a 'telescope' out of a rolled-up piece of paper. This roll of paper "reduced the boundless and unmanageable world to something bounded and manageable". The world became smaller, was fitted within a frame. "Through

---

<sup>23</sup> The narrator's biographical details coincide with hers.

the little tube one really could see, without the tube one only looked", the narrator poignantly says (Ugrešić, 1998, p. 29). Later on in life, photography takes this role of making the world and memories more manageable and reduced to little rectangles.

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, a photo album is akin to a family museum. The second chapter starts with Susan Sontag's quote on how photography actively promotes nostalgia:

Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. An ugly or grotesque subject may be moving because it has been dignified by the attention of the photographer. A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists. All photographs are *momento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt (cited in Ugrešić, 1998, p. 15).

The fear of dying and being forgotten is what prompts the narrator's mother to ask her daughter to be photographed upon her return from hospital. The narrator describes her mother's fear and how she struggles to come up with an expression she would leave her children with - her last photograph; "I watched that inner effort to raise her sad, drooping face and drag a smile onto it, while, no matter how she tried the effort resulted in one single unambiguous expression (which she could not see or know), a naked spasm of fear" (Ugrešić, 1998, p. 22). The narrator also speaks of her dislike of taking photographs; especially the tourist kind of photographs and recalls buying a small automatic camera during one trip abroad. When she came back from her journey, the narrator looks at these photographs again and realises that

she only remembers what she photographed. This makes her ask herself, what would she have remembered if she did not take any pictures.

The way Ugrešić writes in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, mirrors in many ways the nature of memory. Her narrative is fragmented and takes a form of 'verbal photographs' or memory snapshots. Some scenes are numbered, some are not, photographs are brought in to stand for memory and a photo album takes its rightful place as a family museum. The narrator speaks through the stories of others, her mother, her friends, strangers. In his essay 'Exile or Exodus' Dimitar Kambourov compares her to some kind of contemporary "Wandering Jew or a Borges-like Shakespeare doomed to tell the stories of others. However, unlike the latter and very much like a cursed contemporary humanitarian, she knows and understands too much. Her writing on exile at times ferments to an overweening universal competence. Ugrešić's paresia at times appears to lead to a paralysis" (Kambourov, p. 166). There is a sense of guilt present in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. A question poses itself somewhere between the lines: do decent people leave their home, their elderly parents and their friends behind? Is exile selfish?

The jumps and pulls present in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the repetition of certain leitmotifs, according to Vanuska "creates a sense that the reader is floating on a narrative river whose current keeps bumping them from the 'present' shore to the 'past' shore" (Vanuska, 2013). Not only is the reader floating on this narrative river in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, but is frequently sucked into the river's murky depths where the memories reside. This creates the question; does stirring up the muddy riverbed of memories make one's vision even more clouded?



Photographs, as it is widely believed, do not only stand in for memories, they also help us recall our past experiences, they serve as a proof of identity and as a material evidence of the past. Photographs are important in the creation of self-narratives. There is a remarkable scene described in both *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and in *The Culture of Lies*, that demonstrates that even hardened war criminals are aware of this power of photographs:

There is a story going around about the murderer, the Serbian General Mladić, who for more than a year has been turning the innocent city of Sarajevo into a graveyard. It is said that he aimed his guns from the surrounding Sarajevo hills straight at the house of a friend. The story goes on to say that the murderer then telephoned his friend to tell him he was about to blow up his house.

'You've got five minutes to take your albums and get out.'

The General meant family photograph albums. Before destroying everything he owned, the General had 'generously' bequeathed his chosen victim life together with the right to memory, life with a few snapshots (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 70).

General Ratko Mladić seems to be well aware of the power of photographic image. In his article 'The House of Warlords' (*The Sunday Times*, 20th May 2012), Ed Caesar describes how Mladić, now a frail old man and no longer the "jowly, pig-eyed warrior" of the 1990s, known to the world as "the Butcher of Bosnia", "but who preferred his self-appointed nickname, 'God'", complained to the International War Crime Tribunal, because they were using the wrong picture of him on their website and telecast— "a photograph taken when he was arrested in Belgrade last May." He says the image makes him look ill. "When I was captured, I was weak and infirm," says Mladic.

"Now, I have perked up a bit [...] I want my enemies to die of envy when they see me" (cited in Ceasar, 2012).

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, we have a Bosnian refugee telling the narrator that: "Refugees are divided into two categories: those who have photographs and those who have none" (Ugrešić, 1998, p. 7); or those who have proof that they existed, that the life they led existed, the house they grew up in, the school they went to, friends they played with existed and those that don't. As a friend of the narrator puts it: "Life is nothing other than a photograph album. Only what is in the album exists. What is not in the album, never happened" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 27). Dubravka Ugrešić sees photography as a reduction of the unmanageable world into a 'little rectangle'. "A photograph is our measure of the world. A photograph is also a memory. Remembering means reducing the world to little rectangles. Arranging the little rectangles in an album is autobiography" (Ugrešić, 1998, p. 30).

In the second chapter of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, titled *The Poetics of the Album*, the narrator's mother attempts to organise her own memories by putting her photographs into an album. The narrator tries to understand the concept in which her mother organised a dozen or so of these albums but cannot seem to find any sense or logic. "She had given up the battle with genre at the outset", the narrator exclaims (Ugrešić, 1998, p. 18). Her mother keeps on arranging her albums over and over again, as a way of reconstructing her personal history. The album, according to Ugrešić is a material autobiography. Ugrešić sees this organising of an album into a material autobiography as a deeply amateur activity; the same goes for writing one's autobiography. Both compiling an album and writing ones

autobiography, according to Ugrešić are guided by nostalgia. This is why autobiographical works are rarely ironic or humorous. By nature an autobiography is almost always a sad and serious genre. Both arranging an album and autobiographical writings, according to Ugrešić, are doomed to failure and second-rateness because "the very act of arranging pictures in an album is dictated by our unconscious desire to show life in all its variety, and as a consequence life is reduced to a series of dead fragments" (Ugrešić, 1998, p. 31). Autobiography suffers from the same problems in the "technology of remembering; it is concerned with what once was, and the trouble is that what was once is being recorded by someone who is now." The best outcome of these amateur activities, Ugrešić writes, is if they chance to "hit upon the point of pain. When that happens (and it rarely does), than the ordinary amateur creation emerges victorious... Turning even the most splendid artistic works to dust" (Ugrešić, 1998, p. 31).

Curiously, for someone who spent most of the last two decades writing about her experiences of exile, Ugrešić believes that any self-respecting writer should avoid three things: autobiography (done by proxy in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*), writing about other countries (this she did in *Have a Nice Day*) and diaries, as "All three smack of narcissism, which is undoubtedly the bare premise of any literary act, but ought not also to be its outcome. And in all three genres this outcome is hard to avoid" (Ugrešić, 1994, pp. 11-12). Luckily for Ugrešić, she is rather good at hitting that elusive point of pain that turns her own experiences into something widely recognisable to most of her readers, who themselves are inhabitants of an increasingly disenfranchised world.

Ugrešić was an anomaly among her fellow writers in Croatia, who almost all, without fail, renounced their communist party membership and their Yugoslav identity and started euphorically banging the nationalist drum. Today, when the former Yugoslav countries are turning towards the European Union, they are again repositioning themselves as fervent human right supporters and anti-war advocates. This could be perceived by a neutral observer, as a culture of sunflowers; always turning towards the source of light in order to maintain their own positions and survive.

There is a progression evident in Ugrešić's attitude towards exile that could be described as a healing process. In *Have a Nice Day* she writes about a permanent state of homelessness (Ugrešić, 1994, p. 11) and describes how she wrote this book in an attempt "to put my scattered words (and scattered worlds) into some sort of order" (Ugrešić, 1994, p. 1). In her later works she starts to criticise contemporary Eastern European artists and writers, who she believes are readily "selling souvenirs of a vanished culture" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 161), and starts to accept her exile as a lesser evil to complacency. "Today, living in exile, I do not 'buy' the thesis that every exile is traumatic. On the contrary, I consider my decision to possess only a suitcase one of the better ones in life. Repressive homelands are far more traumatic" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 272). In an interview with Svetlana Boym, Ugrešić acknowledges that when she was "local," she tried to write "globally." "Now, when I am not "there" anymore, it appears that my themes are more connected with "local." I think that we all, travellers, nomads, expatriates, repeat Columbus's mistake in a way" (Ugrešić, 2002). What is constant throughout all of Ugrešić's writings is the relentless self-interrogation, the very product of her displacement. Once the country was gone and identity was brought into question, one stops being sure of anything, but rare are the ones who admit to it.

## Chapter 5: YU: The Lost Country

*So gentleman, you would like me to show you the house where I was born? But I came into the world in a hospital in Fiume and that hospital has been pulled down. You will not be able to put a plaque on the house where I lived, for it too has probably been pulled down. Or you could put up three or four plaques with my name on them in various towns and various countries, but I wouldn't be able to help there either, because I no longer remember where I lived as a child, I hardly know which language I spoke. What I do remember are images: a palm waving and oleanders somewhere by the sea. The murky green Danube flowing past meadows, a counting rhyme: eenie-meenie-minie-mo...*

Danilo Kiš (fragment from the unfinished story *The Man Without a Country*)

On the 15th of September 1991, I went for a walk with two of my closest friends down by the banks of the river Sava that flows through my hometown of Slavonski Brod. It was Sunday; we were bored after a three-month-long summer holiday and very excited about going back to school the next day. We were sixteen years old. The usually busy river promenade was eerily empty of people that day. However, we did meet a group of moustached men. It was immediately clear to us that they were army officers... it's strange how you can always recognise policemen and military even when disguised in their Sunday best. They told us to go home immediately, and stay there. Under my breath, I muttered where they could go... As we ran off giggling back to our own homes for lunch, one of my friends, I forgot which one,

shouted back towards me "It's soooo boring, I wish something exciting would happen."

My family's apartment was on the 8th floor of a building positioned right on the town's main square. The windows of the apartment looked at the large Yugoslav National Army (JNA) garrison. I remember my mother cooking Sunday lunch and then the doorbell rang. Outside our front door was a group of Croatian soldiers. They told us to put all of our valuables into the hallway and go down to the basement. And then it started. They attacked the JNA compound.

I remember thinking it all must be some sort of a joke.

I remember being excited and scared at the same time.

I remember how I put all my LP's into the hallway so they wouldn't get damaged by the crossfire.

I remember that my father and my brother were out that afternoon.

I remember bullets spraying the front door of our building.

I remember hearing what sounded like someone trying to get in.

I remember my mother screaming 'it's them' and running towards the door.

I remember grabbing onto her until all my nails broke.

I remember meeting my neighbours for the first time in the basement of our building.

I remember thinking 'pity I've met them only now when we are all about to die'.

I remember the building burning above us.

I remember being sad about all those books my parents brought through the syndicate and never read... only consumed by me and the fire.

I remember being pissed off that I would die a virgin.

I remember when they came to pull us out.

I remember how I learned to zigzag run in order to escape sniper's bullets.

I remember taking shelter in the local supermarket.

I remember falling asleep on bags of washing powder, next to a boy I had a secret crush on (he was our local basketball star).

I remember him waking me up at 3 am and whispering: "What can I get you, Madam?"

I remember asking for ice cream and champagne.

I remember captured Yugoslav army soldiers sitting scared shitless opposite us.

I remember Croatian soldiers handing them box of sweets.

I remember walking into our burned down apartment the following morning.

I remember feeling relief that all the mess was gone and I would not need to clean up my room.

I remember that everything melted except for a big orange gas bottle, lying in red crackling 'coals', waiting to go off like some post-apocalyptic witch's cauldron.

I remember the soles of my red converse shoes melting.

I remember walking out.

The story of me as a photographer starts on the day when our family apartment got burned down together with thousands of prints and negatives my father, an ardent amateur photographer, had accumulated. On that day I became one of those 'refugees' that Dubravka Ugrešić writes about in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, with no photographs, with no past. Indeed, my memories of the events and people I encountered before that Sunday in September 1991 are either non-existent or very vague. I learned then the power photography has over memory. The day after the fire was the

last time my father took a photograph, a perfunctory snapshot to record the damage for the insurance company. Where he stopped, I started. The act of photographing, of looking at the world through the camera lens, helped provide a semblance of control over an otherwise unpredictable world.

*Once upon a time, a fair-haired woman from France drove by this oasis. She shot a photograph of me. She told me: "I will send you the picture." I never received it. And I am in Paris now, for work. I am seeing photographs everywhere. Photographs of Africa, of the Sahara desert and its oases. I do not recognise anything. They tell me: "This is your country, this is you." I? This? I do not recognise anything.*

Michel Tournier (1986)

One day, during a particularly bad air attack, three of my friends and myself took shelter in an old abandoned basement nightclub. There we met a group of Italian filmmakers, who were also hiding from the bombing. They decided then and there to make a documentary about how it is to be a teenager in a war. We were all minors; and I don't remember this television crew running their idea by our parents<sup>24</sup>. For the first time in months (years? ... I don't remember), we felt like someone cared about what we had to say. After they were done filming, the film crew went back to Italy. They promised they would write. They promised they would send us the film. We never heard from them again. Through the acquaintances in Italy I found out that the documentary was shown numerous times on the RAI2, Italian national broadcaster, and that it was very well received.

---

<sup>24</sup> At that time, it did not seem to matter so much to get consent from our guardians, as it looked then, that we would all probably be dead by the time the documentary came out.



From the very beginning of the conflicts, my family decided to avoid watching any news by Croatian or Serbian media; they were bombarding us with lies constantly, relentlessly. The media war was almost as vicious as the physical one. So my father purchased a satellite dish and we watched international news, trying to figure out what was really happening outside our front door. Except, that then, we were confronted with another lie. Like that young Bedouin in Tournier's *La Goutte d'Or* (1986), I could not recognise anything, I could not recognise my own country, I could not recognise the town I lived in all my life, I could not recognise our neighbours. What western media was showing us instead, were people that even to me looked like 'the others': dirty, uncivilised, with matted unbrushed hair and with desperation in their eyes. I remember being very angry. I wished that some of these international news broadcasters would come down into the basement with us, and sit there in the dark while the building was burning above them, without any running water for weeks. Once the bombing had stopped, or the city had surrendered, and they could finally come out from hiding, I wondered what would they feel like if someone shoved a camera into their faces, to be transmitted then into a living room of a family in London or Paris or anywhere in the shiny West, looking at this and thinking, 'Well, these people are not like us, look at them, they look like savages.'<sup>25</sup>

Somehow as the war raged on, I managed to finish high school and enrol into university to study psychology. In 1999, after successfully completing my studies, I applied for a job as an army psychologist. The political situation was still very tense. I expected a reasonable amount of scrutiny and background

---

<sup>25</sup> The truth - in urban areas - was very different. The people depicted as beggars, three months prior to the bombing dressed the same as their Western European counterparts. We all did our shopping in Italy!!!

checks in order for my job application to be processed. However, I did not expect that my phone would be tapped and a thick police dossier with my name on it would be produced (I have never committed a criminal act). Growing more and more disillusioned and irritated with the way the new Croatian state started to resemble a Stalinist-style police state, and especially with the way my peers just took this situation as given without even questioning it, I decided to leave the country. Foremost, I decided not to comply with the politics of forced amnesia. My parents were distraught. Somehow via Prague, I ended up in Ireland. This is where I came across Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. A friend who was studying International Relations said I should read it. So I did. I read it first in 2000, then again in 2003, 2008, 2010 and over and over again as I was working on my research project. Every time the book provided some new revelation. As I changed and floated from different points in my own exile, from unskilled and underpaid jobs - to reasonable ones, from tiny damp flats - to my own home, from people you were thrown together with from necessity - to the friends you chose, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, always appeared different but with one persistent question: How did this foreign woman understand that place, that is so complex and complicated, so well? Of course I noticed the inconsistencies and exaggeration presented in West's account of Yugoslavia, but the essence of what she tried to immortalise in her words was real. It is still real.

On the tenth anniversary of my exile, I decided it was time to try and deal with the conflicting memories and emotions I had about my lost country and to attempt to engage with the meaning of identity. Is identity tied to a nation or a place, or can a person build their own metaphysical home, one that can't so easily be annihilated and taken away?

The subject I was attempting to investigate was incredibly complex: Yugoslavia, exile, memory, identity. I needed a definite roadmap, something to adhere to almost ritualistically. It would be, otherwise, too easy to get lost in the project. And who better to follow, than another displaced person, traveling through the land of the displaced? Rebecca West's huge tome provided the itinerary to almost an hour.<sup>26</sup> The following year, in 2010, I started working on the itinerary and looking for project partners. Fortunately, Belfast Exposed came on board early on, and decided to fund the majority of the project in association with the Arts Council Northern Ireland.

In 2011, I started retracing West's journey as outlined in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Rebecca West starts her journey through Yugoslavia on the Catholic Easter Eve. I started my own journey some 75 years later, on Easter Eve 2011, in Zagreb. The first journey took me through Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia. The second journey started in Skopje on the Serbian Orthodox Easter Eve, 2012, and took me through Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro. The itinerary was organised carefully so it matched West's travel dates. If in any way possible, I did my best to stay in the same places as West did. Every morning, as soon as I awoke, I would read the part of the book that related to that day and would go over my itinerary. This was done ritualistically. And then I would start. I used a copy of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* not only as a reference book, but also as a diary, and wrote my own thoughts and impressions in the margins of Rebecca West's book.

---

<sup>26</sup> Rebecca West, in essence, tells you where and what she ate on a daily basis, as she travels through Yugoslavia.

## Minstreling through Atlantis

*Voyager est, quoi qu'on en puisse dire, un des plus tristes plaisirs de la vie.*<sup>27</sup>

Madam de Staël (1807)

Jean Baudrillard wrote that part of the pleasure of traveling is "to dive into places where others are compelled to live and come out unscathed, full of the malicious pleasure of abandoning them to their fate" (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 43). Unluckily, my journey was not that much of a travel, but a return to the home that was no longer mine. I did not manage to come out unscratched. The thing with exiles is that they change their home for a suitcase. There is no proper return once you forsake your home. So, it makes sense that I 'returned' to what was once Yugoslavia, with a camera. As Susan Sontag writes: "photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of a space in which they are insecure... Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs. The very activity of taking photographs is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel" (Sontag, 1977, pp. 9-10).

Although I started work on *YU: The Lost Country*, as a way of putting my scattered worlds, thoughts and emotions into some coherent shape, it became evident, quite early on, that this was not an endeavour of creating some metaphysical space in which my identity can reside, quite the opposite,

---

<sup>27</sup> *Travel, whatever may be said of it, is one of the saddest pleasures of life.*

it was a funeral procession. I was following a ghost on her travels through the disappeared country. Thierry de Duve calls a photograph - a "consoling object", and continues, "there is something like a mourning process that occurs *within* the semiotic structure of the photograph, as opposed to what would happen with other kinds of images, like drawing or painting. [...] photography is probably the only image producing technique that has a mourning process built into its semiotic structure, just as it has a built-in trauma effect" (Duve in Elkins, 2007, p. 110).

Joel Snyder has said that what we see in a photograph is not what we would have seen in front of the camera at the moment the picture was taken<sup>28</sup>. This is a correct assertion and my work is not an attempt to capture the reality in front of me or some particular moment in time; the only thing I want to convey and transcribe is my emotional and intellectual reaction to that given experience or encounter. The photographs in *YU: The Lost Country* represent my internal reality. It's an imprint of my experiences. A photograph, I believe, points iconically, or inwardly to something that is contained within the frame, and not towards the outside reality.

Baudrillard sees photography as an alternative to writing. For him, "the photograph is a kind of automatic writing - it is very different from the controlled writing of my texts..." When he writes, Baudrillard states, there is an element of control and direction about the activity, and this is the exact reason why he finds images to be his greater passion (Baudrillard, 1997). The approach taken when generating vocabulary (by this I mean exposed frames on the film) for *YU: The Lost Country* was one of automaticity. Mindlessness, as opposed to mindfulness. The rarest activity I can engage with that absolves

---

<sup>28</sup> In Elkins, 2007, p. 110.

me from thinking. In saying this, I obviously had to be mindful enough to expose and focus in a way that will make the image intelligible, but this was not my primary concern, and after 30 years of operating a camera, the activity of taking pictures has become automatic. Our mental images don't appear perfectly focused and illuminated either, so if one is trying to replicate the nature of memory through the use of a photograph, there is no need for the 'perfect exposure'. Memory is imperfect.

I blindly followed Rebecca West's itinerary. My response was intuitive. As Dorothea Lange said, "to know ahead of time what you're looking for means you're then only photographing your own preconceptions, which is very limiting" (cited in Dyer, 2007, p. 6). And also in the vein of Paul Strand's answer to the question on how he chooses the things he photographs: "I don't", he replied, "they choose me" (Strand, 1976, p. 213).

The things that revealed themselves to me, after the negatives were developed, were surprising. Their 'sting/prick' was unexpected. This punctum (in Barthes's sense) is seen here as a personal revelation. Something that belongs only to me. I do not desire this punctum to be universal or essential to everyone who looks at my photographs. It can't be. David Bate has compared the punctum to the emperor's new clothes, and states that the term is overused. When one does not recognise this elusive point, it must mean it's one's own stupidity that made him unable to understand art (Bate in Elkins, 2007, p. 255). Ideally photographs should contain multiple puncta, so the variety of viewers could be triggered into experiencing and recognising their own individual meaning of the work. The best images are multilayered and can be approached from many angles. What matters most, is to first move myself, and then a viewer, but I don't necessary care in which direction

they are moved. In *YU: The Lost County*, I relinquished my control by following someone else's journey; a person walking behind the coffin in a funeral procession, is how I saw myself. So since I gave up control over my movements, I also refuse to force-feed meanings to the audiences.

The punctum is unintentional. Walter Benn Michaels wrote in his essay 'Photographs and Fossils':

if you don't (consciously or unconsciously) mean to be doing something, you cannot possibly be doing it for someone. The idea here is not just that the subject of the photograph is not posing, that the person in the photograph isn't seeking to produce an effect on the beholder of the photograph. Indeed what Fried calls Barthes's originality is that photographs of absorbed subjects - photographs taken, say, when the subject not only is not posing but also is completely unaware of being photographed - seem, to him, 'quintessentially theatrical'. Why? Because in these photographs, it is the photographer who is performing (Michaels in Elkins, 2007, p. 438).

So in *YU: The Lost County* photography becomes a performative activity.

The punctum should not be seen as a defining element that will determine the success of an image, but more like a 'cherry on the top' something that was unintentional but makes our experience of a photograph work on a multitude of levels. This is the inherent generosity of the medium.

The guiding principle when editing *YU: The Lost County*, was to create quite an uncertain and surreal space, one in which the viewer is not sure whether the photographs are reenactments or not. This was done to destabilise the audience, like I myself felt destabilised when on this journey: destabilised by exile, destabilised by the return, and destabilised by the Balkans. The Balkans are often described as ambiguous, transitory, a place of constant flux. Words

like, a bridge, a crossroad, or a border between the West and the East, or between civilisation and barbarism, are often used. "Humans and gods meet and pass each other on a bridge and on a cross-roads." (Tsvetana Georgieva cited in Todorova, 2009, p. 59). Who would want to live on a bridge, or a crossroad, or on a border? These are inhospitable places. And regularly meeting 'higher powers' is not a comfortable experience.

The goal for *YU: The Lost County* was to create a body of work that is at the same time visually beautiful, and also able to induce a 'bad, headachy dream' that Rebecca West referred to, when she described the city of Fiume<sup>29</sup>. According to Colin Graham's review in *Source Photographic Review* (Summer, 2013), I was successful in achieving this:

While men and women of older generations move with quiet melancholy in separate spheres, they are mirrored in an image which places a younger couple together in the same frame, dressed, it appears, in 'traditional' costume, caught up in the commodification of nationalism as a form of dressing-up, and a projection of ethnic authenticity for tourists. Between the silences which seem to envelope the older generation and the ennui of the young, Jurisic's 'YU' is a landscape of still and mournful places, in which the weight of the past forces itself upon everything. Rebecca West valiantly fought to believe in the future of Yugoslavia. Dragana Jurisic traces the effects and aftershocks of its disintegration in the subtlety of her colours, her capacity for intimacy and the intelligence and empathy with which she sees what was once Yugoslavia. Jurisic's 'YU' is still a place which, in West's words, can induce a 'bad, headachy dream' (Graham, 2013, p. 43).

When trying to place this work, it is difficult not to confront the notion of it being travel photography. *YU: The Lost Country* is a result of traveling a specific route and recording the journey with a camera. However, what was

---

<sup>29</sup> Fiume was an old name for the city of Rijeka.



essential to this project was a ritualistic retracing, insofar as this was possible, of Rebecca West's journey through Yugoslavia, that she undertook two thirds of a century earlier. This following, was in fact what was recorded by the camera. There is an element of submissiveness at play here. To follow someone is to relinquish control.

In an accompanying essay to Sophie Calle's *Suite vénitienne*, Jean Baudrillard writes that to follow "is to play the mythical role of the shadow... Following the other, one replaces him, exchanges lives, passions, wills, transforms oneself in the other's stead. It is perhaps the only way man can finally fulfil himself. An ironic way but all the more certain" (Baudrillard, 2008, pp. 77-78). Venice, the city where Calle performed this 'following piece' was an appropriate choice for the task at hand, as "Venice is a vanished city, where all history has already disappeared and where one enters alive into the disappearance - and photography is itself an art of disappearance, which captures the other vanished in front of the lens, which preserves him vanished on film, which, unlike a game, saves nothing of the other but his vanished presence" (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 81). This description of Venice as a place that vanished, where the history disappeared, resonates very strongly with Yugoslavia, a country disappeared.

The camera, like some kind of a magical device, has the capacity to bear witness to the vanished past. Photography's ability to duplicate the world, segment it, focus it, to blur it, to create by doing this, separate worlds in itself where time is frozen, where the scene is always there for us to see, is truly a surrealist phenomenon. When trying to theoretically contextualise *YU: The Lost Country*, the realms of surrealist documentary seem to be the appropriate place. A term more commonly used in film theory, surrealist

documentary aims to blur the distinction between fact and fiction. It could be described as working under a banner of a documentary practice in order to give an impression of the reality, while at the same time trying to disrupt preconceived assumptions about that reality. *YU: The Lost Country*, amongst other things, seeks to examine how the photographer's inner-self manifests or translates into the two-dimensional plane that is a photograph.

## The Exiled Artists as Oikos-Promiscuous

*Exile provides both optics and a perspective for shaking up the natural essentiality of home and home country. Exile is as much an experience of loss as it is a response to a certain ennui of home, a response to home's parochialism, provincialism, congestion with national and family 'values and truths' etc. Exile reveals home and its values as largely ideological and historical constructs. From the homesick perspective of exile home suddenly emerges as a sick home. Departure turns any return into arrival elsewhere. Leaving home thus remains forever marked by the sense of irretrievable loss but also by the perspective and prospect of turning the world outside into a 'home'-proxy. The exile becomes an oikos-promiscuous creature discovering the relative proxy-mity of home as such. Leaving home is replaced by an entering language as always already other and only as such a possible home for being.*

Dimitar Kambourov

Tony White's *Another Fool in the Balkans* gives its real value in his conversations with the artists either living in the former Yugoslavia, or making work about what happened there in the 1990s. One of these artists is Pavel Pawlikowski, a Polish filmmaker that made a documentary called *Serbian Epics* (1992). In *Serbian Epics*, Pawlikowski gets unprecedented access to Dr. Radovan Karadžić, the then political leader of Republika Srpska and who is currently in The Hague being prosecuted for war crimes against humanity. In one of the film's most memorable scenes we see Dr. Karadžić (he was a psychiatrist) standing on the top of the hill overlooking Sarajevo with the Russian poet Eduard Liminov, reciting Liminov a poem he wrote more than two decades earlier, in which Karadžić envisioned the city of Sarajevo burning up in flames:

The town burns as a lump of frankincense  
In this smoke our consciousness meanders  
Empty suits glide through the city  
The stones built into the houses are dying...

After Karadžić recited his poem, he invites Liminov to aim the rocket launcher into the city, upon which we see shells explode into the side of a large block of apartments.<sup>30</sup>

It's Pawlikowski's observation of the artists he met in the former Yugoslavia that I find particularly interesting. According to Pawlikowski, most of the former Yugoslav artists were making highly conceptual work at that time, which did not seriously address the issues they were surrounded with. He calls them irresponsible. "They were all very cool, you know, these artists, and name dropping New York galleries, but none of them seemed really seriously engaged. I blame them for the war as much as the idiots who were doing the shooting; I'll never forget those lazy exhibitions they were doing at that time. They were just posing, playing with nationalism and peasant culture, irony all over the shop, wonderful! It was really cool. Seriousness is what was lacking" (White, 2006, p. 128).

Although I do agree with Pawlikowski, to a certain extent, it is very difficult to make work that is politically aware and balanced in volatile times in history, and especially during war. Lots of artists became nationalistic in these circumstances. For the ones that did not, the choices were to pretend it wasn't happening and I presume these are the artists that Pawlikowski is referencing; to leave the country, or even to quit making art. Where we

---

<sup>30</sup> Is this what happens when you leave two poets with a rocket launcher?

should look to, I believe, is to the exiled artists, because they are distant enough from the issues at hand, to be able to grasp the bigger picture.

Probably the best-known former Yugoslav artist living in exile is Marina Abramović. Whenever asked where she is from, Abramović flatly answers, "I come from a country that no longer exists" (*Observer*, 3 October 2010). In 1997, Abramović participated in the Venice Biennale as an independent artist. Originally, Abramović was supposed to represent Montenegro.<sup>31</sup> Abramović's participation in the Venice Biennale came up against a strong opposition from the Montenegrin Minister of Culture. As a result, Abramović was replaced by Vojo Stanić, a landscape painter. Germano Celant, the chief curator of the Venice Biennale in 1997, intervened and offered Abramović an exhibition in the basement of the Italian pavilion. In her piece for the Biennale, *Balkan Baroque*, Abramović sat for six hours a day, for four days, in a putrid smelling basement, scrubbing 1500 cowbones, presumably representing purification, absolution, mourning and trying to comprehend the crimes committed during the Yugoslav conflicts. During this performance, three videos were being shown in the form of a triptych. The middle video shows Abramović dressed in a white laboratory coat explaining to the audience how in the Balkans we make Wolf-Rats, animals that, when placed under unbearable conditions, begin to destroy each other. I believe that here, Abramović is alluding to her countrymen and to the West's perception of the Balkan people as a merciless warrior race. Once the explaining has finished, Abramović strips off her white coat and proceeds to dance provocatively in the manner of a turbo-folk singer.<sup>32</sup> This video is flanked on

---

<sup>31</sup> The name of the Yugoslavian pavilion stayed on, even if the country did not exist anymore.

<sup>32</sup> Turbo-folk music is a combination of electric rock guitars with added folk sound, of the Eastern variety. It is popular across the Balkans, especially in Serbia and Bosnia. This style of music is associated strongly with the era of war, chaos and despair in the 1990s politics, life and culture in the former Yugoslavia.

each side by video portraits of her mother and father, who by the artist's own account, were both very strict parents with a revolutionary past. In fact, Abramović's parents were both National heroes and after the Second World War worked for the Yugoslav National Army (JNA).<sup>33</sup> In a statement for the 1997 Venice Biennale Abramović claimed that she is only interested in art that can change ideology. In *Balkan Baroque* her attempt was not to defend any of the warring parties, instead it was a way of dealing with her own emotions and the tremendous feeling of shame she had about the war in Yugoslavia.

That year Marina Abramović received the Golden Lion Award for the best artist at the Venice Biennale. However, *Balkan Baroque* was and remains a subject of criticism. In her article 'Marina Abramović: The Space Between', Jessica Greenberg calls this work a familiar visual discourse of "the Balkan carnivalesque, at once brutal and seductive, violent and pathetic [...] a commonplace in films, literature and even everyday conversation" (Greenberg, 2013). This kind of narrative, according to Greenberg, invites at the same time fascination and repulsion. What the Balkan artist is saying to the Western observer, according to Greenberg is:

there is something wrong with us, something dark, and violent and backwards about our mentality. We are victims of our own selves, and a world that can't ever understand us. It says: we are fascinating surely, and you may even find it sparks desire. But don't try to understand us (we barely understand ourselves). It implies: Simply watch our self-destruction and enjoy. The myth of Balkan (and here particularly) Serbian backwardness and barbarism on the one hand and victimhood on the other is perfectly crystallized in *Balkan Baroque*. It is a self-pitying narrative that somehow revels in degradation without ever really

---

<sup>33</sup> Abramović and myself share an interesting biographical detail. We are both children of mixed marriages and we are both grandnieces of the heads of the Serbian Orthodox Church. It has been proposed that both our great uncles be canonised as saints.

dealing with the violence to which it is putatively addressed. The grotesque becomes a kind of excuse-making, a pleasure in self-hatred that in the end only really focuses the viewer back on the subject without shedding any real light on the pile of bones that lies before it<sup>34</sup> (Greenberg, 2013).

I am not convinced that Greenberg's reading of *Balkan Baroque* is a correct one. Admittedly there are a lot of artists who come from the former Yugoslavia and who exploit the stereotypes of the Balkans as wild, uncontrollable, unruly and supremely surreal— for example, the film director Emir Kusturica<sup>35</sup>— but I believe that Abramović's *Balkan Baroque* does not belong to the category of the 'Balkan carnivalesque'. Instead, Abramović's work points towards the prejudices of the West, while simultaneously trying to deal with the personal shame brought on by the Yugoslav wars.

Abramović was against Yugoslavia's disintegration, and saw it as a huge mistake. However, Abramović claims she is not nostalgic. In an interview by Astri von Arbin Ahlander for *The Days of Yore*, she says: "how it was then, how it is now, and how it is not like it was... Who cares? We have to take reality as it is. Now is now. What was then was then. I have no time for nostalgia" (Ahlander, 2011).

---

<sup>34</sup> This mirrors what Constantine said to Rebecca West when they were visiting the monument of Gazi Mestan in Kosovo: "It is too difficult for you, we are too rough and too deep for your smoothness and your shallowness. That is why most foreign books about us are insolently wrong" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 835).

<sup>35</sup> *Underground* (1995), *Life is a Miracle* (2004), etc.

You wanted to buy me  
For a hundred euro  
You said you'd take me  
To your little car  
Your friend lived near by  
He had a house and all  
Where was I from you said  
You guessed Yugoslavia  
But it's hardly Yugoslavia at all

CocoRosie (2004)

Tanja Ostojić, a Serb living in Germany, is another performance artist whose work deals with the issues of identity, exile, ghettoisation, displacement and gender. In one of her best-known works, *Looking for a Husband with EU passport* (2000 -2005), Ostojić placed an online ad with the same title. In the image she used for her ad, Ostojić is standing completely naked and shaved — a self-portrayal that alludes both to what they did to women who had relationships with occupying officers after the liberation of France as well as those in concentration camps. As a result of the ad, Ostojić received and exchanged over 500 letters with potential husbands. In 2001, after six months of correspondence, Ostojić met Klemens G., a German national. One month later they got married. With her paperwork in place, Ostojić moved to Düsseldorf. In 2005, Ostojić and Klemens G. divorced. This occasion was marked with *Divorce Party* in the Project Room Gallery 35 in Berlin. This work, like much of Ostojić's practice, addresses the political injustices, exclusions, and prejudice towards 'Eastern European' women.

Šejla Kamerić, a Bosnian artist living in Berlin, investigate similar issues in her work. In Kamerić's *Bosnian Girl* (2003), we see her as a very attractive young woman, portrayed staring at the viewer, with the graffiti scrawled across her



image: "No teeth ...? A mustache ...? Smel [sic] like shit ...? BOSNIAN GIRL!" Šejla Kamerić lived through the siege of Sarajevo and lost her father in the war in Bosnia. The graffiti she used in this particular work, was left behind in Potočari/Srebrenica by an anonymous Dutch soldier, who was a part of the unit that failed to save around eight thousand Muslim men and boys in the supposedly 'safe haven' of Srebrenica. *Bosnian Girl* was conceived as a public art project (distributed as posters, postcards and 'ads' in newspapers and magazines). Kamerić states that this work not only deals with prejudice of the West towards the former Yugoslavs, but also with prejudice by the former Yugoslavs towards the West.

Works by Abramović, Ostojić and Kamerić, as well as many other artists coming from the former Yugoslavia, seem to be preoccupied with the issues of stereotyping and also with borders. There's an old saying from the former Yugoslavia: "you are never born and die in the one same country"; that to a certain extent explains the artistic preoccupations prevalent there.

*YU: The Lost Country* does not examine prejudice about the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans. It does however depart from the usual documentary representative modes and depictions of the area. Many former Yugoslavs, who saw the images, commented that they resemble photographed memories. They were able to recognise and identify with the images, even if they had never visited the exact locations where the photographs had been taken.

The first solo showing<sup>36</sup> of *YU: The Lost Country* is in Northern Ireland's Belfast Exposed Gallery (running from October to December 2013). The show consists of 35 photographic images and 12 photographed bookspreads that include excerpts from my travel diary, written as annotations in the margins of the *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* book. As well as the images, the wall at the entrance to the main gallery space is covered with a large map of the former Yugoslavia, marking out a visible travel route.

The work will return to a book format in two ways. Firstly, I am presently working on the design for a photobook. The decision to place the photographs into a book came out of the conviction that photography bears more resemblance to literature than any other visual or graphic art. Photographs are like a fragment of a poem, and a book of photographs is a complete visual poem. Literature was the main source of inspiration for *YU: The Lost Country* and the representation of Yugoslavia and Yugoslavs in literature concerned me more than the photographic and visual representations of the same subject. The intersection between photography and literature is significant. Photographs are, for example, often described as lyrical and poetical, and likewise, contemporary writing frequently contains elements that feel photographic. Semiotics are applied to both mediums. Photography, as its very name indicates is a form of writing with light. Both the photography and literary works try to capture and frame the fleeting moment or a feeling by using metaphors and placing the content into a space or shape that will enhance it.

---

<sup>36</sup> *YU: The Lost Country* was presented in a number of group shows, including Belfast Photo Festival 2013 (June), Photolreland Festival 2013 (July), Fading Lights are Fading in Flood gallery, Dublin.

Secondly, the original (British) edition of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* will be unbound and images inserted into the book<sup>37</sup>, then bound again, symbolising thus their return home. The photographs in *YU: The Lost Country* came out of Rebecca West's book; and not Yugoslavia<sup>38</sup>. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, a vast inventory of the lost country, now stands for the former Yugoslavia, in a similar manner my photographs stand for my vanished past.

---

<sup>37</sup> Please note that these will not be the same images as the exhibition prints.

<sup>38</sup> Yugoslavia does not exist anymore, the book however does exist.

## Conclusion

*...exile is not about exile in itself. Exile becomes an entity only to the extent that it opens up for a nomadic attitude based on indifferent, indiscriminate love for a world structured as a journey rather than as a home, as time rather than as place.*

Dimitar Kambourov

As illustrated, the common thread between Rebecca West, Dubravka Ugrešić<sup>39</sup> and my own practice is making work from the position of persons displaced. It was my intention to explore the nature of seeing, in situations when the whole world seems a bit like a foreign land. A couple of themes prevailed in the works of visual artists I looked at: prejudice and borders, the most common obstacles people coming from the former Yugoslavia encounter. In these works, I also feel the sense of mournful detachment, especially in the writings of Dubravka Ugrešić; like a sad lullaby for a stillborn child.

What is especially interesting when looking at both West's and Ugrešić's work is the intersection of gender and displacement and how it influences both the formation of identity and sensitivities to the issues of otherness. Women might be seen as more sensitive to otherness, because their very gender has already made them more socially marginalised. Displaced female artists, knowing well the pain of rejection, are acutely sensitive to 'othering', so much so, that it often becomes the central subject of their work.

---

<sup>39</sup> I also wish to include Marina Abramović, Tanja Ostojić and Šejla Kamerić.

Dubravka Ugrešić said in her interview with Svetlana Boym that the “identity policy is a toy; it could be benign, it could be dangerous, it could be liberating, it could be enslaving. When people realise that they were given a cheap toy identity—and that the real problems are somewhere else, maybe they will start to search for ways to be equal, not different. Because perpetuating the trauma of repressed ethnic and other identities produces a thick and manipulative ideological fog” (Ugrešić, 2002). It is a reasonable presumption, in this era of globalisation, that the concept of identity, as tied to the nation state is rendered obsolete and redundant. This, I believe is not the case, and what happened in the former Yugoslavia showed this.

The question could be asked, is a national identity in any way important; especially by the people who call themselves ‘citizens of the world’, ‘cosmopolitans’, etc? It is often the case that the majority of these self-declared citizens of the world have the luxury to choose to be one. No one has taken their national identity from them. They can comfortably reclaim it, and often do, according to need. Also, everyone is familiar with the phenomenon whereby the true significance and value of ‘things’ is revealed once you have lost them, especially when so many were killed in the name of identity (like in the former Yugoslavia). If it’s worth killing for... It must be important?!

At least one million five hundred thousand Yugoslavs vanished together with their country. They disappeared, like Atlantis, into the realm of imaginary places. Ugrešić calls this the biggest atrocity in modern day Europe, yet not many have gone looking for these lost people. Today, in countries that came into being after Yugoslavia’s disintegration, there is a total marginalisation

and denial of the Yugoslav identity. There are several initiatives that are starting to provide Yugoslavs with some sense of belonging. One of them, the 'Our Yugoslavia' organisation, is trying to get Yugoslavs recognised as an official minority again in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia. The furthest 'Our Yugoslavia' has come in Croatia and Serbia, is the registration stage<sup>40</sup>; in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they are not even allowed to register as long as 'Yugoslavia' is in the title of the organisation.

The *Lexicon of YU Mythology*, an initiative of Dubravka Ugrešić and the editors of the now closed-down *Start* magazine, is however thriving. Here, everyone is allowed to submit their photographs, memories, and video clips of things they remember from the former Yugoslavia.

Another online initiative was Cyber Yugoslavia (<http://www.juga.com>). In its statement, it read:

This is Cyber Yugoslavia. Home of Cyber Yugoslavs. We lost our country in 1991 and became citizens of Atlantis. Since September 9, 1999 this is our home. We don't have a physical land, but we do have nationality, and we are giving CY citizenships and CY passports. Because this is Atlantis, we are allowing double and triple citizenships. If you feel Yugoslav, you are welcome to apply for CY citizenship, regardless of your current nationality and citizenship, and you will be accepted. Please read our Constitution for the details. If you are just curious, you are welcome to visit us as tourists.

This land will grow as our citizens wish. Neither faster, nor slower. Neither more, nor less. So, this site will always be under construction. For a solid country to grow, even a virtual one, it takes some time.

---

<sup>40</sup> By this I mean the registration of the organisation itself.

When we have five million citizens, we plan to apply to the UN for member status. When this happens, we will ask 20 square meters of land anywhere on Earth to be our country. On this land, we'll keep our server.

Unfortunately, this cyber Atlantis has disappeared as well.

*If human beings were to continue to be what they are, to act as they have acted in the phases of history covered by this book, then it would be good for all of us to die. But there is a hope that man may change, for two factors work on him that might disinfect him. One is art... art gives us hope that history may change its spots and man become honourable. What is art? It is not decoration. It is the re-living of experience.*

Rebecca West (1941)

Rebecca West touched the very pulse of Yugoslavia with *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Her intention was to show that the Balkans, although different from Western Europe, are nevertheless an integral part of Europe and that without it, Europe is incomplete. Throughout *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, and in the later references to Yugoslavia, West repeatedly re-establishes her kin-hood to the Balkans and its people via her romantic blood and her intensity of seeing. The premise that the Balkans are a borderline between civilisation and barbarism, that West tried so hard to dismantle, was re-established again by the very people who came in their scores to Yugoslavia, carrying her book under their arm, as a *de rigueur* way of imagining the Balkans.

Rebecca West was a very complex woman, as complex as the country she wrote about in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. She refused the role of a muse to great men such as H.G. Wells, and instead created works that would become an inspiration to others. She used her analysis of Yugoslavia in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* as a vehicle through which to not only explore herself, but also her attitude to art, gender, religion, pleasure and guilt, history, ethics, myths and many other issues. As Italo Calvino said, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* takes up two subjects: the first is Yugoslavia, and the second is everything else. The clarity of her vision and what she saw is extraordinary – clairvoyant, especially when one considers the events that took place there in the last 75 years. West calls it a "preternatural event in my life", where she had "an extraordinary rapture", in her words it "was like being dead and arriving near total comprehension" (West, 2000, p. 168). In the 1920s, Rebecca West experienced a delirium caused by an illness, ever since then she was convinced that she had the second sight (West, 2000, p. 168). Why else should she write such a huge inventory of a country that "ceases to exist?" Her biographer Victoria Glendinning writes that if West had been a poor 17<sup>th</sup>-century woman, she would have been burnt as a witch; Virginia Woolf compared her to a gypsy. "There are several ways of exploring her, and none" (Glendinning, 1987, p. 2). West said that she could only remember things if she had a pencil in her hand, so she could write it down and play with it. The reason she wrote half a million words about Yugoslavia is because she did not want to forget anything about it, and because she wanted to preserve this memory for millions of Yugoslavs, who now live in exile.

At the end of her journey, West was interviewed by a young Croatian girl living in Vienna. To West's surprise, the girl did not speak any Serbo-Croatian. West asks her: "Are you not at all proud of having Slav blood in you?", to



which the blonde girl answers blankly: "Why should I be? What is there to be proud about in being a Slav?" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1088). Rebecca West sees this as an influence that the West exerts; it had cut off this girl from being proud of her own blood, the blood that should be celebrated for "defending European civilisation from extinction by the Turks" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1088), and instead left her like a house without foundation.

West despised exile and thought that nothing good could come of it. In his essay 'Rebecca West and the meaning of exile', Bernard Shwaizer writes that West looked on any kind of expatriation (forced or voluntary) as a "prelude to loss of identity, draining of artistic vitality, and a general sapping of the life-force" (Shwaizer, 2006, p. 6). The Yugoslav Army officers, who destroyed the very cities that were their homes, are a good example of the evils of exile and displacement. The job in the army was traditionally taken up by the men from rural, impoverished backgrounds, who lived a nomadic lifestyle due to the nature of their career. Ivan Stambolić, the former president of Serbia, who brought Slobodan Milošević to power, and was in return - allegedly - murdered by Milošević's men, commented that "They lived in the cities but were never part of them, feeling isolated, rejected. They grew to hate cities and the people who live in them" (cited in Glenny, 1999, p. 588). In a book review from 1971, West recalls a conversation with a Yugoslav friend living in exile in the USA, in which her friend compares exile to "a bleaching process which first makes one an albino and then a corpse" (cited in Shwaizer, 2006, p. 7). Where does this affinity and understanding of exile come from, except from the fact that West experienced it herself? She thought that a person grows stronger in the country of its origin, and that one can never be completely assimilated to another nation. "In any class I feel at home, and I am never accepted, because of the traces I bear of my other origins", she

said. That's why Rebecca West was so strong in her opinions, and that is why she wrote so much. She built herself a home out of words, using a pen as her tool. That is why, I believe, she spent five years of her life taking an inventory of the country that would cease to exist. She built a home out of words for all the other exiles Yugoslavia would produce over the next seven decades. She thought of art as a "cup into which life can be poured and lifted to the lips to be tasted" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 55). She thought of art as a re-living of experience: "The artist says I will make that event happen again, altering its shape, which was disfigured by its contacts with other events, so that its true significance is revealed; and his audience says, 'We will let that event happen again by looking at this man's picture or house, listening to his music or reading his book'" (West, [1941] 1993, pp. 1127-8).

Driving around the mountains of Montenegro, West comes across an old woman walking on her own. This encounter provokes one of West's most poetic moments: "She took her destiny not as the beast take it, nor as the plants and trees; she not only suffered it, she examined it. As the sword swept down on her through the darkness she threw out her hand and caught the blade as it fell, not caring if she cut her fingers so long as she could question its substance, where it had been forged, and who was the wielder" (West, [1941] 1993, p. 1012). That old woman, she met on the mountain road in Montenegro was Rebecca West herself. She examined and re-examined her destiny many times over. She re-lived her experiences through much of her written work, trying to understand the true significance and consequences of these events. She looked at exile and displacement because she wanted to examine what impact it had upon her own destiny, and in turn the destiny of the people who lived the same fate. Rebecca West never 'othered' the

Balkans. She was 'the other' herself.<sup>41</sup> What she would have thought of the recent carnage in Yugoslavia is very hard to say and I am almost afraid to guess. Despite the tendency toward over-romanticisation and despite the inaccuracies that are present in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, the story is that once upon a time an Anglo-Irish/Scottish/English/British lady came to Yugoslavia and was able to reveal truths about the country others failed to see.

---

<sup>41</sup> Rebecca West's displacement was not only due to her Anglo-Irish background. West was abandoned by her father in early childhood, growing up in what was essentially an impoverished single mother household. Rebecca West became a single mother herself, bearing a child with H. G. Wells, out of wedlock. Her criticism of the society and her peers was also a contributing factor.

*Memory betrays everybody, especially those whom we knew best. It is an ally of oblivion, it is an ally of death. It is a fishnet with a very small catch and with the water gone. You can't use it to reconstruct anyone, even on paper. What's the matter with all those millions of cells in our brain? What's the matter with Pasternak's "Great god of love, great god of details"? On what number of details must one be prepared to settle?*

Joseph Brodsky (1985)

YU: *The Lost Country* was originally conceived as a recreation of a homeland that was lost, a journey in which I would somehow draw a magical circle - I was following Roland Barthes's assertion here that photography is more akin to magic than to art - around the country that was once mine and resurrect it, where I will reconnect with 'my' people, a place where I will be understood (like Rebecca West felt she was understood). Instead, it was a journey of rejection, of displacement and exile that was stronger back 'home' than in the foreign place where I chose to live. The realisation that the whole world is a foreign land became pervasive.

To photograph, is not wanting to be present. It's a discomfort with reality. It's a perverse activity of vanishing but also fetishising that moment of vanishing. Photography reinforces this act of fetishism. What happens in exile is that you remove yourself from the reality, as you know it. You disown a home that you feel disowned you (do decent people leave their home and their families, their elderly parents? one might ask here, like Ugrešić asked herself).

There are a significant number of well-known artists who are exiles and émigrés. Once a person loses his or her original world, they realise how fragile all the other worlds are. The fragmentation that occurs as a result, in

return, provides a wealth of material to be explored through artistic means. Photography, in particular, contains elements such as fleetingness, which allow it to capture that sense of rootlessness and dislocation with relative ease. Both exile and photography intensify our perception of the world. In both, the memory is its core. Both are characterised by melancholy. As Salman Rushdie said, exiles live "more comfortably in images, in ideas, than in places" (Rushdie, 1992).

What distinguishes photographic representation of travel from the literary ones is photography's appearance of authenticity. The act of composing a photograph, gives a photographer an opportunity to order the world he or she is looking at, like a demigod in charge of ordering the chaos. A conflict arises from this - a result of the photographer's realisation that no matter how perfectly composed and ordered the world is in his or her photograph - life continues outside of that moment which is captured, chaotic and imperfect for entirety. To replicate reality by photographing it is an illusionary hope.

So what is photography? If I had to answer that question I believe that my answer would be somewhat similar to that given to the narrator of Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. While sitting under the rain of artificial stars in a planetarium in Prenzlauer Allee, she asks her friend, an artist, what art is. He answers: "I don't know. An act which is certainly connected with mastering gravity, but which is not flying" (Ugrešić, 1999, p. 177).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abramović, M. (2010) 'Interview: Marina Abramović'. Interviewed by Sean O'Hagan for *The Observer*, 21 February [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist> (Accessed: 10 Aug 2013).

Abramović, M. (2011) 'Marina Abramović'. Interview with Marina Abramović. Interviewed by Astri von Arbin Ahlander for *The Days of Yore*, 19 December [Online]. Available at: [http://www.thedaysofyore.com/marina\\_abramovic/](http://www.thedaysofyore.com/marina_abramovic/) (Accessed: 1 Aug 2013).

Appleyard, B. (2007) 'Jolly Good Show', *The Sunday Times: Culture Supplement*, 10 Jun.

Ash, T. G. (1996) 'The Foul Balkan Sky?', *The New York Review of Books*, 21 March [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1996/mar/21/the-foul-balkan-sky/?pagination=false> (Accessed: 2 Feb 2012).

Baudrillard, J. (1993) *The Transparency of Evil*. New York: Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (1996) *Cool Memories II*. Duke University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1997) *Art and Artifact*, London: Sage.

Baudrillard, J. (ed. Redhead, S.) (2008) *The Jean Baudrillard Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Berger, J. (1984) *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photographs*. London: Granta Books.

Bissell, T. (2006) 'Euphorias of Perrier: The Case Against Robert D. Kaplan', *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Summer Issue [Online]. Available at: <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2006/summer/bissell-euphoria-perrier/> (Accessed: 20 Mar 2013).

Bjedić, D.I. & Cole, L. (2002) *Sexualizing the Serb: Balkan as Metaphor*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Byrne, R. (2010) 'Picking the Wrong Witch', *The Common Review*, Fall/Winter.

Caesar, E. (2012) 'The House of Warlords', *The Sunday Times*, 20 May [Online]. Available at: <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/Magazine/Features/article1038744.ece> (Accessed: 12 Mar 2013).

Calle, S. (1988) *Suite vénitienne*. Seattle: Bay Press.

Cantwell Smith, B. (1996) *On the Origin of Objects*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Carpenter, H. (1988) 'Too big to join the Picts', *The New York Times*, 31 July [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/31/books/too-big-to-join-the-picts.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed 21 Feb 2012).

*Cat People* (1942) Directed by Jacques Torneur [Film]. United States: RKO Pictures Films.

Christie, A. (1975) *The Secret of the Chimneys*, New York: Deli Publishing.

De Windt (1907) *Through Savage Europe*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.

Deak, I. (1993) 'A World Gone Raving Mad', *The New York Times*, 28 March [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/06/specials/kaplan-balkan.html> (Accessed: 20 Mar 2013).

Drakulić, S. (1993) *Balkan Express Fragments From the Another Side of War*. London: Hutchinson.

Drew, E. (1995) *On the Edge: The Clinton Presidency*. Austin: Touchstone.

Durham, E. M. (1920) *Twenty Years of Balkan Tangle*. London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd.

Dyer, G. (2006) 'Journeys Into History', *The Guardian*, 5 August [Online]. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/aug/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview2> (Accessed: 20 Oct 2011).

Dyer, G. (2007) *The Ongoing Moment*. London: Abacus.

Ed. Elkins, J. (2007) *Photography Theory*. New York: Routledge.

- Ehrenpreis, M. (1928) *The Soul of the East*. New York: Viking Press.
- Fadiman, C. (1941) 'Review'. *The New Yorker*. 25 Oct.
- Ferguson, R., Gever, M., Minh-ha, T.T., West, C. (Eds), (1990) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Furuya, S. (1995) *Memories*. London: Themes and Hudson.
- Fussel, P. (1980) *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars*. Oxford University Press.
- Gefer, P. (2011) *Photography After Frank*. New York: Aperture.
- Glendinning, V. (1987) *Rebecca West: A Life*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Glenny, M. (1999) *The Balkans 1804 - 1999: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers*. London: Granta Books.
- Globus Investigatory Team (1992) 'Croatia's Feminists Rape Croatia', *Globus*, 11 Dec.
- Gordon, C. & Gordon, J. (1925) *Two Vagabonds in the Balkans*, London: The Bodley Head.
- Graham, C. (2013) 'YU: The Lost Country', *Source Photographic Review*, Summer Issue.
- Greenberg, J. (2013) 'Marina Abramovic: The Space Between', *Chicago Humanities Festival*, 21 February [Online]. Available at: <http://chicagohumanities.org/blog/guest-blog/marina-abramovic-the-space-between> (Accessed: 8 Aug 2013).
- Gunther, J. (1938) *Inside Europe*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Hall, B. (1996) 'Rebecca West's War.' *The New Yorker*, 15 April [Online]. Available at: [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1996/04/15/1996\\_04\\_15\\_074\\_TNY\\_CARD\\_S\\_000374034](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1996/04/15/1996_04_15_074_TNY_CARD_S_000374034) (Accessed: 22 Jan 2011).



Hamilton, P. (1994) 'The Knife Edge: Debates about Memory and History'. *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*. Ed. Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton. Melbourne: Oxford UP, pp. 9-32.

Hansen L. (2006) *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. London: Francis and Taylor.

Hertog, S. (2011) *Dangerous Ambition: Rebecca West and Dorothy Thompson: New Women in Search of Love and Power*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Holbrooke, R. (1998) *To End a War*. New York: Random House.

Hussein, A. (2005) 'Beyond the borders of brutality', *The Independent*, 18 November [Online]. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-ministry-of-pain-by-dubravka-ugresic-translated-by-michael-henry-heim-515715.html> (Accessed: 28 Jan 2012).

*In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011) Directed by Angelina Jolie [Film]. United States: FilmDistrict Films.

Jacobs (2004) *Shaming the Devil: Essays in Truthtelling*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

Jacobs, A. (2012) 'On Black Lamb and Grey Falcon', *The American Conservative*, 3 December [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/jacobs/on-black-lamb-and-grey-falcon/> (Accessed: 5 Apr 2012).

Kambourov, D. (no date) 'Exile or Exodus: 'D. Ugrešić's The Museum of Unconditional Surrender and Iliya Troyanov's The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks around the Corner', [Online]. Available at: <http://www.dubravkaugresic.com/pdf/Kambourov.pdf> (Accessed: 5 Apr 2012).

Kaplan, R. D. (1990) *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. New York: Vintage Books.

Kaplan R. D. (1993) (1996) *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*. New York: Vintage.

Kaplan, R. D. (1995), 'Inside the Balkan Nightmare'. *Washington Post*, 3 May.

Keegan, J. (1993) 'A Primitive Tribal Conflict only Anthropologists Can Understand', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 Apr.

Kendrick, W. (1996) 'The Key to Rebecca', *The New York Times*. 27 October [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/10/specials/west-rollyson.html> (Accessed 20 Jan 2012).

Kerr, S. (2000) 'A Woman Without Compromise', *The New York Times*, 10 September [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/10/reviews/000910.10kerr.html> (Accessed: 20 Feb 2012).

Kipling, R. (1982) *The Light That Failed*. New York: Amereon Ltd.

King, C. (1999) 'The Bad Guy', *The New York Times*, 21 November [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/21/books/the-bad-guy.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (Accessed: 21 Feb 2012).

Lukić, J. (2006) 'Poetics, Politics and Gender'. In: *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Ashgate.

Lyall, A. (1930) *The Balkan Road*. London: Methuen & Co.

Mellow, J.R. (1999) *Walker Evans*. New York: Basic Books.

Miles, J. (1995), 'The Serbs Show Their Knack for Defeat', *The New York Times*, 12 August [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/12/opinion/the-serbs-show-their-knack-for-defeat.html> (Accessed: 21 Feb 2012).

NATO International (2012) 'History of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the origins to 1992', *SFOR Stabilisation Force* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nato.int/sfor/indexinf/bihistory.htm> (Accessed: 16 Oct 2011).

Osborne, P. D. (2000) *Traveling Light: Photography, Travel and Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Ostojić, T. (2009) *Integration Impossible?: The politics of Migration in the Artwork of Tanja Ostojić*, Berlin: Argobooks.

Parr, M. & Badger, G. (2004) *The Photobook: A History, Volume I*. London: Phaidon Press.

Parr, M. & Badger, G. (2004) *The Photobook: A History, Volume II*. London: Phaidon Press.

Penrose, R. (1980) *The Road Is Wider Than Long: An Image Diary From the Balkans July - August 1938*, London: London Gallery Editions.

Popescu, M. (2007) 'Imagining the Past: Cultural Memory in Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*', in *Studies in the Novel*, McGill University, Fall Issue, pp. 336-56.

Press, J. (2003) 'Slavic Essayist Dreams of Communism and Joan Collins', *The Village Voice*, 4 November [Online]. Available at: <http://www.villagevoice.com/2003-11-04/books/slavic-essayist-dreams-of-communism-and-joan-collins/> (Accessed: 1 May 2013).

Pritchett, V.S. (1990) *Lasting Impressions: Selected Essays*, London: Chatto & Windus.

Said, E. W. (2003) *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Classics.

'Rebecca West' (1976), *Tonight*, 16 September [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12257.shtml> (Accessed: 24 Feb 2012).

Rancière, J. (2007) *The Future of the Image*. New York and London: Verso.

Rollyson, C. E. (1995) *Rebecca West: A Saga of the Century*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Rushdie, S. (1992) *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981 - 1991*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Said, E. W. (1986) *After the Last Sky - Palestinian Lives*, with photographs by Jean Mohr. London: Faber and Faber.

Said, E. W. (2001) *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press.

Schweizer, B. (2006) 'Rebecca West and the Meaning of Exile'. Conference paper.

Silber, L. and Little, A. (1997) *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*. London: Penguin Books.

Simmel, G. (1950) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. London: Collier Macmillan.

Solomon-Godeau (1991) *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sontag, S. (1977) *On Photography*. New York: Anchor.

Strand, P. (1976) *Paul Strand: Sixty Years of Photographs*. New York: Aperture.

Tax, M. (1993) 'Five Women Who Won't Be Silenced', *The Nation*, 10 May.

Tax, M. (1999) 'Aboard the Balkan Express', *The Nation*, 13 Dec.

Todorova, M. (2009) *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press.

Tournier, M. (1986) *La Goutte d'Or*. Paris: Gallimard.

Trotsky, L. (2001) *The Balkan Wars 1912-13: The War Correspondence of Leon Trotsky*. New York: Pathfinder Press.

Ugrešić, D. (1994) *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Ugrešić, D. (1998) *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. London: Phoenix House.

Ugrešić, D. (1999) *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*. London: Phoenix House.

Ugrešić, D. (1999) *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. New York: New Directions.

Ugrešić, D. (2002) 'Dubravka Ugrešić, An Interview', Interview with Dubravka Ugrešić. Interviewed by Svetlana Boym for the *Bomb Magazine*, Summer Issue [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bombsite.com/issues/80/articles/2498> (Accessed: 28 Mar 2013).

Ugrešić, D. (2008) *The Ministry of Pain: A Novel*. London: Telegram Books.

Vanuska, K. (2013) 'Citizen of Literature: Dubravka Ugrešić', *The Quarterly Review*, Issue 17 [Online]. Available at: <http://quarterlyconversation.com/citizen-of-literature-dubravka-ugresic> (Accessed: 10 May 2013).

Vervaet, S. (2011) 'Whose Museum? Whose History? Whose Memories? Remembering in the Work of Dubravka Ugrešić'. *Comparative Critical Studies* 8.2–3. Edinburgh University Press.

Taylor, J. (2010) *Into the Heart of European Poetry*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Walker, I. (2007) *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and Documentary Photography*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Wells, L. (Ed.). (2010) *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. 4th ed., London: Routledge.

West, R. (1955) *A Train of Powder*. London: MacMillan & Co Ltd.

Warner, M. (1981) 'Rebecca West, The Art of Fiction No. 65'. Interview with Rebecca West. Interviewed by Marina Warner for the *Paris Review* 79 [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3249/the-art-of-fiction-no-65-rebecca-west> (Accessed: 10 Nov 2010).

West, R. (1993) *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A journey through Yugoslavia*. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics.

West, R. (1934) 'The Necessity and Grandeur of the International Ideal', in *Challenge to Death*. Ed. Philip Noel Baker. London: Constable, pp. 332-232.

West, R. (ed. Kime-Scott, B.) (2000) *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

White, T. (2006) *Another Fool in the Balkans: in the footsteps of Rebecca West*. London: Cadogan Guides.

Williams, D. (2010) "'Europeans without Euros': Alternative Narratives of Europe's 'New Happiness'", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European*

*Studies*, [Online]. Available at: <http://www.eusanz.org/ANZJES/index.html>, (Accessed: 9 Sep 2011).

Woods, K. (1941) 'Rebecca West's Brilliant Mosaic of Yugoslavia Travel', *The New York Times Book Review*, 26 October [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/10/specials/west-lamb.html> (Accessed: 15 Dec 2010).

Wolfe, L. (1991) 'Rebecca West: This Time, Let's Listen', *The New York Times*, 10 February [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/10/books/rebecca-west-this-time-let-s-listen.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (Accessed: 9 Sep 2011).

NOTE: A copy of *YU: The Lost Country* book is submitted together with the thesis