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The angel of nostalgia trapped between East and West

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Abstract:
The paper focuses on the problem of East and West and the Central European paradigm as constructs for Western Europe to define itself against a distorting mirror where cultural, political and historical opposites of the hegemonic western story are contained. To address this issue, the article chooses to explore the literary works and debates of some writers trapped between East and West, always being pushed to the East, willing to flee to the West or rather opting for a vanishing point to liberate themselves from an etiquette in which they cannot recognize themselves. The focus will be on the late nineties, when the former space of Yugoslavia disappeared, taking this particular case as a paradigm and guided by the critical writings of Dubravka Ugrešić, who at a certain point becomes a sort of Walter Benjamin's angel, trapped between past and future, East and West. The aim is to use this metaphor in order to delve into the unresolved paradox by way of accompanying Ugrešić's voice with that of some other writers who help opening up the renewed debate East-West-Central Europe and critically presenting it in terms of space and time, mainly Yuri Andrukhovych and Andrzej Stasiuk. Moreover, the paper will point to some aesthetic choices that seek to subvert the grand narrative of progress and the problem of cardinal points.

Keywords: Nostalgia, East-West, Central Europe, Walter Benjamin, poetics of space and time

A European distorting mirror reversed

> «Sometimes I think that this is how it should be: the entire world's treasury, all the dough of the Frankfurt banks, the vaults of the Bank of England, the virtual funds of corporations circulating in electronic space, the contents of the multilevel underground coffers on Bahnstrasse in Zurich, all the paper, all the ore, the rows of digits coursing through the icy bloodstream of fiber-optic cables, should be thrown out, should lose its value, should be exchanged for zeroes in such loci as Erind, Vicşani, Sfântu Gheorghe, Rozput, Tiszaszalka, Palota, Bajram Curri, Podoliniec, the square in front of the church in Jabłonna Lacka, the train station in Vilmány, the train station in Delatyn at dawn, the grocery store in Livezile, the grocery store in Spišská Belá, the pub in Biertan, the rain in Mediaş, and a thousand others, because the map I look at is a fishnet, a star-studded night sky, an old T-shirt or torn bedsheet, and through all those spots that I visited shines a light stronger than the failing light of simple geography, stronger than the ominous glow of political geography and the moribund glow of economic geography. And nothing will sew up those holes. The future will pass through them like food through a duck, will sift through them like sand through fingers. No big ideas or big fortunes or degenerate time will disturb these places, these rips in the gist and foundation, these traces of my presence. Yes, I know, my attitude is benighted, backward»[i].

This is how Andrzej Stasiuk, returning to the places he has travelled to and recreating them with a map in front of him and his baggage of memories, images, scents, coins and stamps, depicts a sort of nihilistic monetary flow from the West to the East. *On the Road to Babadag. Travels in the Other Europe* is the writing in movement of the Polish writer's wanderings through Eastern Europe, first published in 2004, right at the time when Poland joined the European Union and went the opposite direction, westward. But Stasiuk is not interested in traveling to the Western cities where all wishes seemed to be put from the eighties onwards and rather, finding himself in Słubice in the summer of 1983 or 1984, looking across from the river to Frankfurt, turns his back and «that same evening I headed back, east. Like a dog, I had sniffed an unfamiliar locale, then moved on»[ii].

Eastern Europe was invented by Western Europe in travel and in the imagination of the Enlightenment, as Larry Wolff[iii] has convincingly shown, and important to the invention were movement and time, the idea of civilization united to that of progress. They pervaded geography and created an image of Eastern Europe dependent on spatial and time coordinates that those in the West, writers of history, masters of conquest and mapmakers, shaped and sanctioned. The wealth of Western Europe facing the poverty of Eastern Europe, those lands that awaited the industry and knowledge of the West to be exploited, those lands that could be measured against a developmental scale of civilization on their way to gradually becoming *more European*. In Andrzej Stasiuk's literary image, all this wealth is suddenly flowing to the East and the thought that from the eighteenth century onwards has dominated our understanding of the East-West relationship is shattered into pieces. While it is true that the flow of capital follows the

understandable and traditional direction, West to East, we eventually find how all this wealth, all the progress and prosperity of money coming from the capitalist centers, turns into nothing, equals zero, loses all its value. Thus, the mirror of western prosperity, its eastern negative reflection, has executed vengeance and put into question the usefulness or appropriateness of the developmental model, of the very idea of progress.

Mirrors are frequently invoked when speaking of identity[iv]. According to the historian Josep Fontana, Europeans have always sought to define an identity by looking themselves into a series of distorting mirrors[v]. Some of the distorting mirrors the historian analyzes and that give name to each chapter of the book he wrote in response to Jacques Le Goff call in 1994 to famous historians for answers to the always problematic questions «Who are the Europeans? Where do they come from? Where are they going to?» are "the Barbarian mirror", "the Christian mirror", "The Rural Mirror", "The Savage Mirror" or "The Mirror of Progress". What interests us here is that the mechanism involved in the construction of alterity through history that Fontana describes and the dynamics of historical reading and writing that help perpetuating the discourse regardless of whoever is endowed with the *privilege* of being the new barbarian, are applicable to the apparently inevitable categorizing of the East as a persisting alterity. He is not alone in noting that the way we have been writing history from the eighteenth century to the present has consistently presented a single evolutionary line that leads us to our present (that of the winners) as the *normal* state of things. Deviation from this straight line we draw on our national and European histories is labeled as either utopia or aberration. In addition, we need the other to fix this narrative. In fact, as Josep Fontana intelligently points out, while we commonly agree that the Scottish evolutionary school with men like Darwin, Hume, Spencer or Huxley invented progress, it would be more accurate to admit that they instead invented the backwardness of the others in order to define, by looking themselves into this mirror, their own progress.

Voyages to the East, accordingly, became the search for a different time, an ancient time, a previous step in human history that should ultimately yield to the latest happy stages of western civilization. The lands of the East were thus related in backwardness and models of development and, when the occasion arose, reevaluated as to their progress toward or away from the benefits of western civilization and modern economy and politics. A progress, to use the transparent words of Timothy Garton Ash, towards: «democracy, the rule of law and a market economy»[vi]. Of course, for the dialectic approach of the distorting mirror to work, the West needs also to be essentialized, the internal differences blurred and the discordant aspects ignored. To this purpose, the West becomes reified and characterized by a set of given features as if there were no other possibilities and realities within; this is what James G. Carrier calls «Occidentalism», a phenomenon to which we choose to be academically blind[vii]. Andrzej Stasiuk, along with Dubravka Ugrešić and Yuri Andrukhovych, the main authors that will be discussed in this article, undermine with their writings the current of thought that has validated the East-West axis and made it possible to this day. Their efforts aim at the very notion of progress and historical writing as a linear plot and question from the inside a geographical, cultural, social, political and historical construction in order to unveil the distorting mirror and the idea of time and space that is inevitably embedded in our conception of the European map. The grand narrative is put in crisis precisely when its promises prove themselves false in the same movement they had once initiated to the eastern pole of the continent.

When a world that made perfect sense to Dubravka Ugrešić, Yugoslavia, falls into pieces, the writer will find herself changing identity, crossing frontiers, becoming an «ex» from a time and a place that no longer exist and representing this «ex» world in the West: «And who is speaking? I. Who am I? No one. I come from Atlantis. Atlantis does not exist»[viii]. Taking to voluntary exile after a press scandal in which Ugrešić and four other intellectual women had been falsely accused by the Croatian government in the printed media[ix], the writer will come to be an ironic distorting mirror, an angel of nostalgia that delicately revives the past so that it flickers for a brief instant in a different scenery where this past was not expected. Thus, Dubravka Ugrešić's fiction and non-fiction writing will follow the course of a truncated autobiography as she travels across multiple frontiers and tries to rebuild the paths of memory, of a lost world and a lost country that can reemerge, for instance, in empty and neutral spaces such as the city of Berlin, populated with refugees in the nineties. This is the meaning of the literary efforts contained in the prose of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, where the author appears as a displaced being, an «ex» and a «souvenir», an East representative of a torn world in the happy and free-of-conflicts West, wandering through the surreal streets of Berlin where displaced objects (those from the East), will subvert and call into question the mirror and its reflection. As Ugrešić will reflect upon in his poignant essays, «When he crosses the border, the ex-Yugo-writer arrives in a territory he does not recognize: the West European literary market-place. [...] He becomes everything he had never been until that moment. Like it or not, he becomes the representative of his country, whether the old one or the new one [...] like it or not, he becomes a new kind of tourist guide, an ethno-writer (something that had never entered his life) ».[x] These unhappy sellers of souvenirs of a vanished epoch, these unfortunate creatures who are no one but reporters of a reality in front of the avid and ethnographic eyes of the West, who lose their identity as they enter the

new reality (a Western market-place), are indeed themselves walking souvenirs, marketable pieces: « 'I'm more and more convinced that we are all museum exhibits...', says Zoran»[xi].

They are museum exhibits because they have become the past, and their world has also become the past. The future blows from West to East, and when the East enters the West, it has already aged centuries. If count de Ségur could feel, back in the winter of 1784, that he had moved back ten centuries when crossing the border from Prussia to Poland[xii], the same is valid when the movement is reversed. Ex-Yugoslavs and all Eastern Europeans alike, after the Berlin Wall has been destroyed, become, at home or in exile, «out-of-date»[xiii] beings. It is precisely in the conscience of being anachronistic, of being out of date when transplanted to the West, that Dubravka Ugrešić will find the opportunity of resistance to the absorption by western society as a fabricated image and to the time mechanisms that condemn to disappearance everything that has not converged into the victorious present. By experimenting with time and turning the device of estrangement into a survival strategy, the virtue of Ugrešić's nostalgia will «see everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home and try to cohabit with doubles and ghosts»[xiv]; for Svetlana Boym, this is how reflective nostalgia operates. The scholar speaks of reflective nostalgia's critical and potential virtue as opposed to a simple restorative nostalgia of the past and pays attention, for instance, to these souvenirs and treasures rescued from the trash that Russian émigrés keep in their houses in the United States. The same displacement of objects in time and space will contribute to the destruction of temporal and spatial categories in the city of Berlin in the flea markets, those strange and attractive places, those palimpsests and «heterotopic spaces», following to Michel Foucault's theorizing of the coexistence of non-normative times in the same place[xv]:

> «The Berlin flea-markets resemble the slit stomach of Roland the walrus who swallowed too many indigestible objects. The Berlin flea-markets resemble the Teufelberg with its long-hidden contents spilling out. The Berlin flea-markets are open museums of everyday life, past and present. In Berlin flea-markets times and ideologies are reconciled, swastikas mix with red stars, everything can be bought for a few marks. In the Berlin flea-markets surviving uniforms with different insignia are heaped together harmoniously, their owners long since dead. They rub together, and their only enemies are moths. In Berlin flea-markets east trades with west, north with south, Pakistanis, Turks, Poles, Gypsies, ex-Yugoslavs, Germans, Russians, Vietnamese, Kurds, Ukrainians all sell souvenirs of a vanished daily life at the flea-market, that rubbish heap of time. There one can buy things which nobody needs»[xvi]

Andrzej Stasiuk agrees with the image of Berlin as a vacuum, as an illusion and as a gallery of mirrors that keeps East and West apart. Many Poles, Hungarians, ex-Yugoslavs, are trapped into this particular place with their shadows and reflections. As we have seen, though, the Polish writer decides to travel eastwards. In remote cities and villages that do not conform to the usual waypoints in road maps, Stasiuk will similarly fix his gaze on displaced objects, although this time they are travelling the opposite direction, west to east. And, on their way to the eastern pole of the continent, they become wasted, rendered absurd, ridiculous, devoid of their usefulness; they change function and meaning, they are exposed to a different light that, once again, reverses the mirror. This is what happens to the empty boxes of Western deodorant, perfume and coffee that the Romanian *babushka* at the pension located in Sfântu Gheorghe keeps as decoration next to a religious icon: «The icon and that Western trash bin were the only ornaments in this spare interior. I didn't care to consider the symbolism or the semantics of their juxtaposition»[xvii]. Time, tells us Stasiuk, the day of tomorrow, the future, is unable to reach these spots of the East and, when it does so, it is already tired, exhausted, it feels as a breeze already breathed by someone else. By the Durrës suburbs, in Albania, we find German cars' cemeteries and, as a sour reversal of the Albanian exodus of 1992 to Italy, from this once imagined fairy-land come in return «flotillas laden with scrap, junk, internal combustion corpses»[xviii]. We need not move from Albania, for the Saranda beach constitutes in the writer's prose the most powerful image of an East turned into the West's trash can. The wind blows from the West and brings nothing but garbage:

> « On the beach in Saranda, people moved the trash to make a place for themselves. They pushed aside the plastic bottles, cartons, cans, those emptied wonders of civilization, the shopping bags of Boss, Marlboro, and Tesco, to clear patches of sand on which entire families could spread out. The wind carried the transparent tatters landward and draped them on the trees. It blew from the west. Never in my life had I seen such a mess and the calm with which people lived in it and added to it constantly. The patches of cleared sand were the size only of a mattress or a little larger, allowing a group to sit. There was something elegant and contemptuous in their gestures as they discarded used things, a kind of lordliness of consumption and a theater of indifference toward whatever didn't give instant gratification. The wind blew from the west both literally and figuratively, yet it brought nothing of value»[xix]

A sort of lordly, aristocratic resistance of these families to the objects that testify to Western's prosperity and consumerism and that, long after the Iron Curtain has ceased to exist, have failed to fulfill a promise and instead come to the shores of Albania to die and fill up with dirtiness the sand. Arguably, this is the East still invoked as a distorting mirror in which the West can regard itself, but the image produced no longer reaffirms the shiny identity of the head of progress. On the contrary, it casts a dull question mark and the somber shadow of a doubt on its very heart.

Yuri Andrukhovych achieves the same effect in *Twelve circles* when he mockingly turns an uncertain spot in the Ukrainian Carpathians from an astronomical observatory in its first *pre-history* in 1939 and an athletic training station in the Communist period during the sixties and seventies, into a resort called «Tavern On the Moon» owned by the all-powerful man of business Ylko Vartsábych. With great sarcasm, Andrukhovych accounts for the arrival of the freedom of capital and the slight possibility of fast enrichment portrayed into the person of this capitalist oligarch, Ukraine's "new type of man," who is in possession of almost everything: markets, gas stations, restaurants, public restrooms, factories, missile silos, an ostrich farm, pool halls, railroad lines, «ferns in bloom», «river pebbles», «junkyards». His «Tavern On the Moon» constitutes in itself a microcosm of the Western model transposed to the Ukrainian Carpathians, in a literary device that unmasks its madness and vividly exposes its unsuitability. Under a luxurious covering, lie devastation, mildew and cold. When the Austrian citizen of Ukrainian origins, Karl-Josef Zumbrunnen, roams through the corridors and rooms of the building, he cannot help noticing a strange combination of different periods, where remnants of earlier times appear here and there to disturb the imposing façade. Objects are juxtaposed in a grotesque description in which all of them appear out of place, redundant: computers, fax machines, simulators and synthesizers, sublimators wrapped in electric wiring, abandoned video cameras, home theater systems, antennas (regular and satellite), vacuum cleaners, night vision goggles, rapid excitement machines, milking units, portable land-sky-land rocket launchers, special dryers for chest, etc. A self-confessed lover of ruins, Andrukhovych describes in his essays in *My Europe*[xx], a four-hand publication with Andrzej Stasiuk, that the part of the world he comes from is full of objects from present and past and, like Dubravka Ugrešić, believes that flea markets are privileged spaces for the coming together of witnesses from former times that insist to endure.

Through his attentive look, we are able to detect, far beyond a romanticism of the ruins and a historical and mythological mixture of recollections, a nostalgic itinerary where anachronistic beings that are still hoping for a return of the Habsburg archduke Ferdinand and speak in an incomprehensible language, together with those who did not benefit from the end of the old regime and were abandoned to the fate of real state speculation, make themselves visible if only temporarily. The Ukrainian writer rescues them from oblivion and brings them forward as phantasms that haunt the same space and go on living with the obstinacy of those who refuse to acknowledge history's fatality. Most of them would rather restore a distant past than trust in a future they see full of uncertainties and lacking of advantages.

Standing in between: an angel of nostalgia for unstable borders

These phantasmagoric inhabitants of the fields between Europe and non-Europe that Yuri Andrukhovych takes to the forefront for us to notice, are trapped in a difficult frontier that is, at the same time, a spatial one, in the Galicia where east and west meet, and a temporal one, between time past and the time that comes after. The agony of knowing past communities will not ever come back into existence and, at the same time, despairing before an uncertain future that comes always late and always wasted. The same unstable border where the Galician teenagers of the Carpathian Mountains in *Twelve circles* find themselves. They are unable to cross the river but they cannot make it to the other side of the forest either, and thus they live in between two forbidden territories, in a very narrow plot, «between fear of the past and fear of the future».

«And Petar Petrović stands on the border between before and after, between one age and another, between one reality and another, between one Utopia and another, between the past and the future – and he trembles. And he sees clearly: those who stand confused on the border seem to disappear; those who make up their minds hold in their hands a ticket for the future, a ticket for the Balkan Express»[xxi]. In "Priests and Parrots", Dubravka Ugrešić takes the character Petar Petrović as her alter ego in essay writing to explain what happens in a moment of danger to those who stand on the border, between ages, realities, utopias and cardinal points. The poor Petar Petrović might remind us of Walter Benjamin's reading of the angel of Paul Klee in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, which we will reproduce with the purpose of illustrating the main point of the argument:

> «There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the

past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm»[xxii]

Petar Petrović is this angel of nostalgia trapped between east and west, past and future, unable to pause for an instant and «piece together what has been smashed» because the storm of progress will not let him do so. In fact, he needs to make up his mind quickly in order not to vanish in an unbearable emptiness. Will he find refuge in the so-called *Central Europe*, a sort of space in between worlds, temporalities and cardinal points? After all, this could be the zero point where the dream for a different Europe would solve the dilemma, a space of possibility where one could pause and be saved from the bipolar east-west dichotomy. «Only after setting aside the geopolitical pipe dreams, the special interests and alliances, the local antagonisms, conflicts, and wars, the complex historical backdrop woven of mutual attraction and repulsion, do we begin to see Central European culture in a modern perspective –as a kind of "nostalgia for Europe»[xxiii]. These are the words of the Serbian writer Danilo Kiš, who warns us against an easy romanticism for Central Europe while extending the invitation to a nostalgia for Europe, a lyrical flight into a non-existent territory. But the now «ex»-Yugoslav writer Petar Petrović, who stands on the border, protests in fictional dialogue with Ugrešić: he wishes he would have a last name with 'K' (Kundera, Konrad, Klima, Kiš, Krleža...) but he has not, he would like to find solace under the umbrella of *Central Europe*, but as Ugrešić finds out herself, it is too late. Writing in 1993, the dream escapes her: «He gaped, he had missed out, and everything had been there: he had had Krleža, he had had Kiš, and, after all, Europe had been and still was his cultural home»[xxiv].

Let us reconsider one of these 'K's to unveil how the mechanism of *Central Europe* can, on the one hand, invoke a certain liberation and nostalgia while, on the other hand, it perpetuates the alterity of the east and reinforces the deception of the historical and cultural narrative that supports it. In the seventies, Milan Kundera abandons Czechoslovakia for France and becomes an exile from Eastern Europe. The simple etiquette horrifies him and brings awareness of the border he has crossed and the necessity to reframe it. Therefore, in an essay entitled "The Tragedy of Central Europe,"[xxv] published in 1983, Kundera will explain to the West with urgency why his small country is not Eastern Europe. In the eighties, the Central European idea came to vogue again and distanced itself from the previous German-based *Mitteleuropa* mainly due to the writings of three prominent thinkers: the Hungarian Jenö Szcücs, the Polish Czesław Miłosz and the Czech Milan Kundera[xxvi]. Kundera's text was the one that received most of the attention in the West, owing to the simplified argument and the extreme emotional appeal with which he engaged the audience.

Plainly, Kundera places all his efforts in linking his small country and some others that lie between Germany and Russia to the Western tradition and prove that Czechs, Slovenes, Poles, Slovaks and Croats have nothing to do whatsoever with the utterly different and alien Russia. While these small nations have been developing in productive tension with the Western European model, Russia has turned its back on this path and has continued with its own traditions. Thus, Russia emerges as an essentialized alien, an 'other' civilization, Central Europe's new East, «Central Europe's Constituting Other»[xxvii]. Given the situation in which Kundera found himself, given the circumstances, we can understand the reasons of his desperate cry at that specific moment. What we cannot do is continue to justify today the perpetuation of alterity in the name of a Central Europe that, instead of creating a utopia and exposing the falsity of the east-west mechanism, instead of aiming at a different Europe, keeps pushing the barbarians to the East. Fully aware of the perverse device, Dubravka Ugrešić brings to the forefront the inescapable absurdity at a time when the East had theoretically ceased to exist:

«Although it has been destroyed, the Berlin wall still exists. Westerners are still "Wessies", and Easterners are "Ossies", and the term 'Eastern Europe' is still in wide usage. […] "Easterners" of course do not agree with a common appellation which so crudely eliminates cultural distinguishing features. Central Europeans will quite rightly insist on the fact that they are different from the so very "Eastern" Russians, and hesitate to accept into their midst the equally "Eastern" Bulgarians, Romanians and Serbs. For their part, the Russians will regularly point to the example of Peter the Great and rightly demand their place in Europe. Western Europe, of course»[xxviii].

Hers is yet another cry, aimed at both east and west, aimed at the distorting mirror that cannot cease to exist because when the West has become identified with all that one wishes, when the West is the future, everyone wants to

be the West: «Why do "Westerners" keep assiduously shoving "Easterners" into "Eastern Europe"? And why, when "Easterners" pronounce the word "Europe", do they usually imply its "Western" half, passing over their own as though it did not exist? »[xxix]. Timothy Garton Ash, whom we have previously alluded to as one who validated the positive virtues of the West to which certain eastern countries were making progress to, did nonetheless detect very well the identification of Central Europe with a West charged with optimistic resonance back in 1986[xxx]. He notes that Central European means the Western, the tolerant, the skeptical, the rational, the humanistic, the democratic; to sum up: all that is good. After 1989, when some of the post-communist countries become eligible to enrolling in the Western European trademark values, a counter image is still needed to emphasize the need to enter into the European Union and the NATO, to adopt the irrefutable dogmas of, let us repeat Garton Ash's own words once again: «democracy, the rule of law and market economy». All in all, Western Europeans, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, were probably asking themselves something in the line of the famous Cavafy's verses: «And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution».

A vanishing point to 'set alight the sparks of hope': an attempt to conclude

We may resort to Walter Benjamin and his *Theses On the Philosophy of History* one more time in our search of «the writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past», the writer capable of taking «control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger»[xxxi]. Read under this light, and as we previously began to see, Dubravka Ugrešić, Yuri Andrukhovych and Andrzej Stasiuk might sometimes help us escape the persisting alterity, the dichotomy and distorting mirror, the trap of the Central European idea and the narrative of progress. Not only by reversing the mirror and movement of objects so as to break up with the idea of prosperity, but also in the way they carry with themselves different pasts and inscribe them in geography and imagination. Thus, Dubravka Ugrešić plays with her own memories, time and space in the fragmented narrative of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* when she looks at old photographs in order to release the past: «I always carry the photograph with me, like a little fetish object whose real meaning I do not know. [...] Sometimes I plunge attentively into reflection of the three bathers mirrored in the water, into their faces which are looking straight at mine. I dive into them as though I am about to solve a mystery, discover a crack, a hidden passage through which I shall slip into a different space, a different time»[xxxii]. By the same token, Andrzej Stasiuk sets to capture those things that are on the verge of disappearing and place them before our eyes so that they begin to destabilize our comfortable position. He has confidence in unleashing that something beyond «the distorted mirror, magic lantern, mirage, phantom that mercifully sneaks in between what is and what ought to be» because the East, according to the author, is that place where it seems that «everything should be other than it is»[xxxiii]. And, least but not last, Yuri Andrukhovych's call for a decentered Europe, his persistence in tracing the steps of the Central European involuntary trips of his grandfather and his father only to discover a transitory zone where trains did and undid voyages that were always a flight. Flights from war, from misery:

> «The little boy is contemplating the river. Beyond the river, the New World begins. On the other side of the Danube lies America, that is, the future. On the other side of the Danube everything that, with time, will come true (or will not come true). The Danube is, in fact, an ocean, so great is his attraction power. Its closeness means many essential things: time, eternity, history, mythology, our existence. A vanishing point where the return trip converges. Yes, a vanishing point where the future converges with the past»[xxxiv].

A vanishing point for past and future, an empty landscape, a transitory zone, spots where east and west come together to challenge economic and political geography and hegemonic imaginary constructions. The center as a vanishing point becomes the place of nowhere for Andrzej Stasiuk, for whom living in the center is living in a zero space where we one can move east or west. By emptying Central Europe, both authors re-signify a space of utopia and nostalgia, gather together unexpected countries and, at least in the essays they wrote for *My Europe*[xxxv], are cautious enough not to refill the space with the usual listing of values and qualities. To the contrary, they free Central Europe of the fixation to define an identity. It is precisely in the flow of ambiguous and not too evident lines, rivers and paths, that the possibility for different pasts and, therefore, different futures, can emerge in what could still be a «nostalgia for Europe».

In places like Slovenia or in cities such as Kraków in Poland and Chișinău in Moldova, Stasiuk is fooled, deceived, for he cannot get used to those places that are so irrevocably conformed or that, farther east, are trying to imitate their western counterparts, trying to recreate their idea of a world that is somewhere else. The mimicry of a universal that needs to be unmasked. Albania, instead, is the land that the author contemplates as the European unconscious, «Yes, the European id, the fear that at night haunts slumbering Paris, London, and Frankfurt am Main.

Albania is the dark well into which those who believe that everything has been settled once and for all should peer»[xxxvi]. In Albania, the past speaks of a country that resisted to the cardinal points, east and west, enemies at each flank, with the madness of Henver Hoxha; of defrauded citizens rebelling and shooting to the air in a clear challenge to reality. Eventually, as we have already explained, it is in an Albanian beach, Saranda, where Western trash is poured daily and daily ignored.

Dubravka Ugrešić's vacuum and vanishing point is exile and is Berlin. The author quotes from Viktor Shklovsky: « 'I have walked a long time in the bridges over the tracks that intersect here, just as the threads of a shawl drawn through a ring intersect. That ring is Berlin' »[xxxvii]. In that ring, divided for a long time, later fully drawn to the West, but still somewhat divided geographically and economically, the writer in exile, the souvenir from a vanished epoch, is at the moment of danger. She faces dissolution, just as the *revenants* of Joseph Roth who make it to the West face disintegration within western society but, right before that happens, they might success in undermining and exposing the presuppositions and the conventional lies of that very same society, as Claudio Magris notes in his reading of the celebrated Central European writer[xxxviii]. «I am in Berlin, I am pursued by two nightmares around which like large spools I am winding the taut threads of my life. The name of one is home, the one I no longer have, and the name of the other is wall, the one which has sprung up my lost homeland. In Berlin I often stretch up to invisible observation posts and vaguely shake my fist in the direction of the south. In nightmare dreams, I build a home which is always destroyed anew»[xxxix]

Bio-note

Marta Fernàndez Soldado is pursuing her PhD in Comparative Literature at Universitat de Barcelona. Her dissertation focuses on the alternative historical narratives that emerge from post-Yugoslav film and literature and nostalgia as a critical attitude to open up historical narrative and rethink spatial and temporal coordinates. She has recently been working on identity and the presence of history in postwar European cinema and Central-Eastern Europe as a space of dispute.

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[i] Andrzej Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag. Travels in the Other Europe* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), Epub edition.
[ii] Andrzej Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag. Travels in the Other Europe*, Epub edition.
[iii] Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 1994).
[iv] We will just briefly recall, to this respect, Lacan's famous seminal theory of the "mirror stage", first developed in the article "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I" (1936).
[v] Josep Fontana, *Europa ante el espejo* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1994 and 2000).
[vi] After 1990, Timothy Garton Ash was interested in the acceptance of part of Eastern Europe into the European Community and ventured to point out some countries that were closer to this idea of Europe than others and were to be accepted with priority. Cited in Maria Todorova, "Hierarchies of Eastern Europe: East-Central Europe versus the Balkans" *Occasional Paper (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. East European Studies)*, Vol. 46 (1996): 5-47.
[vii] James G Carrier, "Occidentalism: The World Turned Upside-Down" *American Ethnologist*, 19, no. 2 (1992): 195–212.
[viii] Dubravka Ugrešić, "Priests and Parrots", in *The Culture of Lies*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), p.39.
[ix] The press scandal took place in 1992 and is usually referred to as the «Witch Hunt» or the «Five Witches of Rio» and it involved five Croatian women writers and intellectuals who were accused of having secretly conspired so that Dubrovnik would not host the next international literature PEN conference. Their ethnicities, those of their husbands, professions and salaries were all made public, while they were accused to work for feminist and Yugoslav interests rather than the national ones of the new Croatian State. A detailed account can be found in Marina Warner, "Witchiness", *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 31, N. 16, (August 27, 2009): 23-24.
[x] Dubravka Ugrešić, "The Tale of the Bomb and the Book", in *The Culture of Lies*, opus cit.:156-157.
[xi] Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (New York: New Directions, 2002), 229.
[xii] Described by Larry Wolff in *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, opus cit.
[xiii] I am borrowing the term with which Predrag Matvejević defines the statute of the «ex», more precise in French «inactuel» and in Italian «inattuale», in *Mondo ex e tempo del dopo. Identità, ideologie, nazioni nell'una e nell'altra Europa* (Milano: Garzanti, 2006).
[xiv] Svetlana Boym, *The future of nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 251.
[xv] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, Vol. 16. no. 1. (Spring, 1986): 22-27.
[xvi] Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, opus cit., 229.
[xvii] Andrzej Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag. Travels in the Other Europe*, Epub edition.
[xviii] ibid.
[xix] ibid.
[xx] Yuri Andrujovich and Andrzej Stasiuk, *Mi Europa* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2005).
[xxi] Dubravka Ugrešić, "Priests and Parrots", 36.

[xxii] Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Phylosophy of History.* Translated by Dennis Redmond (2005) from the German edition: *Gesammelten Schriften I:2.* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974).
Available at: http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.html

[xxiii] Danilo Kiš, "Variations on Central European Themes", in *Homo poeticus: essays and interviews*, edition and introduction by Susan Sontag (Nova York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 97-98.

[xxiv] Dubravka Ugrešić, "Priests and Parrots", 35.

[xxv] Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," *New York Review of Books*, 31, no. 7 (26 April 1984): 33- 38.

[xxvi] A detailed account of the three proposals as well as a historical and critical perspective on the development of the idea of Central Europe is found in Maria Todorova, "Hierarchies of Eastern Europe: East-Central Europe versus the Balkans", opus cit. We fully agree and share her reading of Kundera's essay as well as the traps and interests behind many of the subsequent developments on the Central European idea.

[xxvii] The term is developed by lver B. Neumann in his article "Russia as Central Europe's Constituting Other," *East European Politics and Societies*, 7, no. 2 (Spring 1993).

[xxviii] Dubravka Ugrešić, "The Tale of the Bomb and the Book", 156.

[xxix] Ibid., 157.

[xxx] Timothy Garton Ash, "Does Central Europe Exist" in George Schopflin and Nancy Wood, eds., *In Search of Central Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989). The article was written un 1986 and included in Schopflin and Wood's volume in 1989.

[xxxi] We are referring to thesis VI in Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Phylosophy of History*, opus cit.

[xxxii] Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 4.

[xxxiii] Andrzej Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag. Travels in the Other Europe*, Epub edition.

[xxxiv] I have used the Spanish translation, unable to find an English version: Yuri Andrujovich, "Revisión Centroeuropea" (*Central European Revision)*, in Yuri Andrukhovych and Andrzej Stasiuk, *Mi Europa*, opus cit.

[xxxv] Both Andrzej Stasiuk and Yuri Andrukhovych in the face of recent developments and after the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine have made statements about the Europe of values that are dangerously too close to a Europe identified with the West and uncritically charged with positive institutions and meanings. Ariko Kato points to this change of discourse in "Rewriting Europe: The Central Europe of Yuri Andrukhovych and Andrzej Stasiuk", *Slavic Eurasian Studies*, no.30 (2016): 91-102.

[xxxvi] Andrzej Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag. Travels in the Other Europe*, Epub edition.

[xxxvii] Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 96.

[xxxviii] Claudio Magris, *Lontano da dove. Joseph Roth e la tradizione ebraico-orientale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989)

[xxxix] Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 139.