





Her Own Creator

An interview with Dragana Jurisic by Orla Fitzpatrick

The story of Dragana Jurisic as a photographer began on the day that her family apartment was burned down along with thousands of prints and negatives that her father had accumulated. Her photography started where his stopped. She states that ‘on that day I became one of those ‘refugees’ 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.’

Jurisic was born in Slavonski Brod, Croatia (then Yugoslavia) and it is her experience of that state’s violent disintegration which forms the backdrop to *YU: The Lost Country*. She returned to her former homeland with a copy of Rebecca West’s indefinable classic *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* in hand. As she travelled in West’s footsteps she took photographs and annotated a copy of the book. Her pilgrimage was both a physical and psychological journey. Like West’s text her images touch upon themes of nationalism, identity and memory. The resultant book combines Jurisic’s visuals with her observations and quotations from West. She was nominated for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize in 2016.

In 2014 she shelved plans to film a spaghetti western and followed another path. This time, in pursuit of an enigmatic aunt, Gordana Čavić, who had fled rural Yugoslavia in the 1950s. In Paris she had lived a life of espionage, sexual intrigue, and glamour. Or perhaps she hadn’t?





Jurisić's forthcoming photo-novella, and her multi-layered photographic project *My Own Unknown*, unpick the myths and legends surrounding her aunt's life. It will be exhibited in Paris and New York in 2017.

I called into her Dublin studio during that no-man's land between Christmas and New Year and we talked about photography, literature, and how Croatian poets are treated like rock stars.

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OF I was looking at one of your earliest photographic projects *Seeing Things* (2010). The title is borrowed from a Seamus Heaney poem and you also reproduce Michael Hartnett's 'A Necklace of Wrens.' How did you come across his poetry?

DJ I love Michael Hartnett, he is one of my favourite poets. I don't remember how I got into him, when I came to Ireland I read a lot of poetry. This was before the time when I was a photographer, and I think poetry to me—it is like magic—it is really soothing, I always read a lot of poetry. In ex-Yugoslavia poets had this kind of status of rock stars, and even people who are not very well educated would read poetry. You hear so much about Irish writers, and I have lots of poet friends at the moment, but they don't have the status that I imagined they would have. I tend to go back to poetry a lot, when I feel stuck or for inspiration.

OF Are you reading any poetry at the moment?





I have been reading a lot lately. Charles Simic, he is an **DJ** American-Serbian poet. Yes, I read it all the time. I tend to go back to the same books over and over, and then I read *The Paris Review* so I can keep a little bit on top of the new.

Have you always matched/combined literature with your **OF** photographic images?

I think because literature is the main source of inspiration **DJ** to me, for sure. It was just organic in a way. It wasn't forced, or conceptualised as that. It made sense then to make work that ties text and images together. It comes from the same source.

There is a tradition of pairing photography and literature, **OF** for example, the 1930s 'dust bowl' collaboration of Walker Evans and James Agee: *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*. There are many examples of photographers pairing up with writers or using literature as an inspiration.

I think, to me, photography resembles poetry more than **DJ** other visual arts because it is two-dimensional, the piece of paper (if you are talking about print not the digital version). It has a specific and contained form in order to function. I mean, photography means writing with light.

You can equate a line with an image or a paragraph to an **OF** image. I will move on to your *YU: The Lost Country* project in which you retrace Rebecca West's journey across Yugoslavia in the 1930s. When did you first encounter West?





DJ I think it was in 1999 when I moved to Ireland and I was living with a boyfriend who was studying international relations, and it [*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*] was on his required reading. And he was reading it and said, I think you should really read this. And I did—but the first time that I read it I found that it over-romanticised Yugoslavia, and I was angry. I still had so much anger about what had happened there, and I thought that we were despicable people and a horrendous country and we deserved our fate. So I read it, but I wasn't very impressed. Then maybe two or three years later I went back to it when my original anger had subsided and, actually, I was amazed by the book and how accurate it is. I mean, it is not a history.

OF It defies categorisation.

DJ It totally defies definition. You know, lots of people recognise it as a masterpiece of the twentieth-century writing. It is not really a travel journal, it is not an historical account or research of the Balkans. It is not only a diary, it is everything. But in a professional sense to write a book that does not fall into any category, it was like professional suicide. And also to make it half a million words long. I mean, that is crazy. It is like you are standing in front of the mountain.

OF Did you struggle to read it the first time?

DJ It's one thousand two hundred pages long, and somewhere in the middle of Serbia (page five hundred or so) she goes on this tangent about the royal family and stuff, and I would





get so frustrated. It was like literally walking up a mountain: you would climb to the top and think it can't get this heavy again, and stroll down to these beautiful descriptions, and musings, and philosophical thoughts. And then you would end up again in front of another huge mountain. So it was really like work. At the same time, you are amazed at her writing but on the other hand you are like this is laborious. It was taking so much of my time. Even to carry this book around. I would read a lot on my way to work and back. It was heavy, it is like a brick, it takes up half of your bag.

Did you read it again after that?

OF

I've read it so many times. Each time you discover something new. In a book of that density it is impossible to keep everything in your head. Each time that you read it you discover something that is amazing that you missed the first time around. So I kept rereading it many, many times. I think that I have read it more than most. I went to a few conferences in New York on Rebecca West. Writers and academics mostly talk about her other work like *Return of the Soldier*, smaller books that they teach. Even to teach *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, it is almost impossible. How can you even put this in a curriculum? I actually had a feeling most of them had never read it. They had attempted to read it. I think for them it was interesting to have me there. Someone who had spent a lot of time studying the book.

DJ

Did you read any of the West biographies?

OF





DJ You see, what happens in biographies as well is that they omit the period of time when she wrote this book. I read three biographies. I met two of her biographers, and I wrote to the third one and we were in e-mail correspondence.

OF I have bought all three but I've only read the one Victoria Glendenning wrote in 1987.

DJ My favourite biography is that one. And then you have one by Carl Edmund Rollyson, an American biographer: *Rebecca West: A Life* (1996). He has just published one about Susan Sontag. He is really a biographer, it is factual and quite dry. Glendenning gives you the juicy bits. By all accounts, what I have heard about Glendennig is that she is a similar woman to West. You know they are strong and opinionated. They could read each other. The last biography was published three years ago: *West's World: The Extraordinary Life of Dame Rebecca West*. It was by a British academic, Lorna Gibb, and it adds to the story as some of the letters that were not available to Glendenning and Rollyson were used. For me the most useful text was the selected letters edited by Bonnie Kime Scott. The letters gave me the most data about what was happening in the life of Rebecca West, through her letters to her husband and other people, during this pre-war era. What is interesting is that Yale and the University of Tulsa both have archives of Rebecca West. They include private documents, diaries, and photographs. She was a really diligent diarist, and there are diaries for all the years except from '37 to '42, I think. So those five years when she was writing and promoting the book are half missing. There are





rumours about why that might be so. During my research, I encountered three or four curious individuals who said that she was working for British Intelligence and that was the reason. But so were many people at the time. It is not like a James Bond novel. But I think that is one of the reasons that she never returned to Yugoslavia once it was run by Tito and had become a communist country. She was a royalist.

You annotated a copy of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* whilst **OF** you travelled through the former Yugoslavia. I noticed parallels in how both your and West's observations on the country were coupled with reflections on what was happening in your personal lives. You had brought your own life and concerns with you.

I think we were going through similar periods of our lives— **DJ** our late thirties when we were doing the books. It was a kind of an existential crisis of the late thirties, really for both of us. She had a miscarriage and operations. I was going through the same stuff at the time, weird stuff. There were lots of overlaps. I guess when you are so much immersed into someone's life or work you find the coincidences and similarities you must.

I have a huge amount of admiration for her living in that time. I am not ashamed to say it—I was binge-watching *Downton Abbey* over Christmas and it covered a similar period. Rebecca West was an upper-class woman but from an impoverished family. They were living on hand-outs from a rich uncle. Just thinking about being a suffragette: she was sixteen when she started writing for *The Freewoman*,





and then to end up being a single parent in the 1930s. Her life is often filtered through the prism of being the mistress to a much more famous man and the mother of his child. I think that the intelligence that comes through her writing and observations, sometimes to me anyway, surpasses that of HG Wells.

OF Some say that she detected and flagged the dark forces gathering in the 1930s. Now we have commentators saying that it is happening again and that there are parallels between the 1930s and today.

DJ I do feel that, I think this definitely feels like just another pre-war era where things are blooming but at the same time the canaries in the coal-mine are dropping dead.

OF She noticed small incidents of intolerance in the book. They could be viewed as signals of and precursors to much larger crimes.

DJ The language of the 1930s and 1940s, compared to our ideas of political correctness, is way out there when it comes to racism, or homophobia, or anti-semitism. In the book, she is really pissed off when they go to a Romany neighbourhood in Macedonia. She is so upset by the way a German woman, the wife of a Serbian poet, talks about, and treats, gypsy people.

OF Is that the passage where she talks about children playing in the market-place in Skopje? The one which is also





reproduced in your book?

The German woman says that they should all be got rid of. **DJ**
The book was written before the Second World War, but it brings so many premonitions. And also in the prologue of the book West says she wrote it because she knew that the country will disappear. It was very prophetic in a way. You can say, from our remove, that all the signs were there. I mean, really, were they? When they look back at our time they will say the same thing but most people ignore the facts.

I think this project lends itself perfectly to becoming **OF**
a photobook. A lot of photographic exhibitions don't necessarily translate well into book format. The textual element and a strong accompanying narrative provides a very good reason for it to have become a book. I was looking at reviews of your work and the book *YU: The Lost Country* and there seems to be quite a focus on the literary side of your work rather than discussing the photographic process.

I don't mind that at all. Lots of the reviewers are more **DJ**
people of words than images. I don't know what that means—maybe I am better at writing than photography? I think that when I am trying to sum myself up I don't think I am particularly excellent at writing or a great photographer, but I think I use both mediums to my advantage. They help each other.

I really liked the pairing of your text 'strolling through the **OF**





neighbourhoods. The smell of chewing gum and underage sex' with that photograph of the woman about to dive.

DJ But that totally did not illustrate it.

OF Yes, it did not illustrate it at all, but I think that this spread worked within the context of the whole book. The mood carries over to other images. Your quotations, and your observations were made whilst you were travelling, and the book is like a journey. You convey the atmosphere. They are not matching literally, but as a whole they work. You can take your observations and bring them to an image which occurs three pages on from where the quotation appears. That is indicative of a successfully sequenced photographic book. The amalgam of image and text. It is the whole thing together which is very hard to do.

DJ It is about creating this third space. There is a fight to the death of image and words. They compete for attention. And I think that I was lucky because I went with a designer who doesn't design photobooks. She approached it in a very novelistic way, Oonagh Young. She has an MA in Literature and another in Visual Arts and she is a graphic designer. So she actually gave equal importance to both.

OF The textual element is more than mere captions.

DJ Yes. There are kind of like extended captions in terms of form.





But their content is more than ‘this is a particular geographic location’ etc. They impart more than just factual information. In your current project *My Own Unknown* it feels like you are moving through the twentieth century. It is a natural progression in time period from the 1930s to the 1950s. **OF**

I didn’t even think about that, but it is totally right. I went back to before the Second World War with one life and now I am in the 1950s. **DJ**

So this project focuses upon your aunt who left Yugoslavia in the 1950s for Paris. **OF**

She left a village where my grandmother lived and where my mother was born. She left and went to Paris. A person of no education, who had never been in a town bigger than, say, ten thousand people. Then suddenly she lands in Paris in the 1950s. And you know when you said in reviews people refer more to my writing than my photography? I think that kind of got into my head, and then I thought I can write her story. So I decided this time to write a photo-novella. It is forty thousand words plus images. So now I am in Rebecca West territory again. A photobook, or art book—what is this? Who is going to buy this? This is uncategorisable. Photobook people don’t like too much text in photobooks, and then the format will scare people off. I think it will be interesting to see how this new work will be received. **DJ**

You refer to the different layers of the project as chapters. Have you gathered material relating to your aunt? **OF**





DJ The photo-novella is just one chapter of the whole big project called *My Own Unknown*. This book deals with the life of my aunt and has kind of interwoven into it the life of *L'Inconnue de la Seine*—"The Unknown Woman of the Seine," who was an inspiration to many writers including Nabokov, and Anaïs Nin. It is like a fictionalised biography of two women about whose lives we do not know very much. We don't know anything about *L'Inconnue de la Seine*—we don't even know was she really a young woman who drowned.

OF There is this idea of her and the mask and that we can throw any identity on to her.

DJ That is great for artists. I mean, I am interested to see how this will all work out. My aunt's story is very gripping.

OF This was a grand-aunt?

DJ She would be in her eighties now. She is not a direct aunt. She was a first cousin. When you are from a small village, and all grow up in the same house, she is considered an aunt.

OF When did you first become aware of her existence?

DJ It was her funeral. I think I was eleven when she was buried in 1987. I was at the funeral with my grandmother anyway, visiting my grandfather's grave. And I remember this incredibly weird bunch of people appearing. In this village, old women who are married wear headscarves. It





is a really remote farming community and old-fashioned. And suddenly you have these flamboyant Parisian people wandering around this country graveyard. I mean, how did they even get there? Even as a child I heard the gossip. And then I forgot all about it, and then I was doing research for a spaghetti western film I want to make. And I went to visit my grandmother's grave, and as I was there the grave of Gordana Čavić is just behind it, and I saw this black marble stone with the picture of a beautiful woman on it. Totally out of place again. It felt really like it called me. Just leave the spaghetti western for now, I think, you have better work to do. I didn't plan it, I believe in following clues, your intuition telling you to do this now. So many weird things happened when I was in Paris doing research. There were lots of rumours that my aunt was involved in the sex industry. How do you find out information about that? Also about her work as a spy? You cannot find that information through official channels. The country does not exist anymore. It is not like East Germany where you can have access to the files. The files are locked, you cannot access them. I had to find it out through some alternative methods, through unofficial methods what exactly the story was. That is why it is fictionalised biography, I cannot claim it is factual because lots of the blanks I filled in myself.

You have written a PhD. How are you tackling this different **OF** type of writing? Do you have a routine?

I wish I was that disciplined. What I do is show up for work. **DJ** Between my lecturing, I have days where I go to the National





Library of Ireland to write. Some days you would write two or three thousand words, and then other days you just go there and look at the screen and nothing is coming. But I still go in the hope that something will appear. The writing process has been somewhat uneven and to write in the style of a novella is new to me.

OF I found that with academic writing you constantly have to refer to a thesis and it is a rigid way of writing. It is difficult to loosen that up.

DJ It is uncomfortable almost. There is this great story, it would make a great movie. But you have to now honour it with your writing. It will be a photo-novella. It is not just your writing, it is also the images. And I think of this next project more in terms of a graphic novel. Instead of the illustrations you will have photographs. You know Ed van der Elsken's *Love on the Left Bank* from 1954? As similar to that format as possible.

OF In that book the atmosphere conveyed by the images matches the story but it is a format that hasn't really been repeated that often since the 1950s. It really worked. There are not many examples of photographers who have replicated the photo-novella.

DJ There is a book that I bought by a German artist Annette Behrens. It is about a man called Karl-Friedrich Höcker who worked at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp and it is called *(In Matter of) Karl*. It combines text, archival





material, and contemporary photographs taken by Höcker. I like how she put that book together. It is a mixture of archival stuff and diaries. Höcker went to this mountain resort close to Auschwitz called Solahütte. She reproduces his holiday pictures. It is about his life and pictures of them having ‘fun.’

So it brings a variety of formats and types of material **OF** together—contemporary material and historical.

Her book was designed like a dossier. **DJ**

The form matches the content. **OF**

With my project, I would like to go more into a diary **DJ** format.

Are you going to use existing photographs of this woman? **OF**

When she died, there were rumours that she was poisoned **DJ** by a radioactive substance and that was in 1987 just before the fall of communism in Europe. They got rid of lots of spies in that way. She knew that she was dying and came home. She brought her camera and her Super-8, and her films, and videos, and negatives, and personal photographs. And then after she died, her mother had these two young people who were minding her. They were not related to her. She was left without children after Gordana died. They found the old woman throwing most of the negatives and films into the fire. And they asked, why are you doing this?





And the old woman said ‘no-one should know her.’ I think the reason she was afraid was because of the incriminating content in some of these pictures and films.

OF So it is an edited collection?

DJ Her mother only left the stuff, that in her mind, was okay. It is edited by an old woman, pre-dying, and it was totally censored by her. This old woman had ended up in prison when Gordana ran away the first time in the 1950s. That is how they blackmailed Gordana into spying for them. I think the woman had a bad experience from before. There was this big box—completely faded—and into that was stuffed all the material that survived. I also have her projector and rolls of film. Amongst all of these archival photographs, there are still some very peculiar images that escaped the attention of this old woman. So it will be a combination of archival footage and my own photography taken in Paris. It will also involve going to places where she lived and interviewing people who knew her. As well as going back to the village where she was from.

OF Did you do this through street directories? Did you contact people from her network? What was your first lead?

DJ The first lead was a woman of my age who has two daughters who was like a surrogate daughter to Gordana. I think she inherited some of her personal belongings as well. She was the first point of contact. This was someone who really knew her. Then from her I met other people whom she brought





to France. Everyone has a very different version of the same person. The *My Own Unknown* project is about how little we know about ourselves and about others—who are more unknowable. There is this woman but everyone sees her as a very different person. Some see a saviour who enabled them to have a great future, to other people she is a person who preys on young women and brings them into the sex industry. These are rumours that are unsubstantiated, these are rumours. I never met the woman but I did meet the people who she really helped. By bringing them from this village; taking them out of poverty and bringing them into a life in Paris. Finding them jobs and taking care of them.

I guess she was very complex as well. She was not just a benign person, she was a total survivor. It is really a story about oppression. Because there is this woman who against all odds wants to be free. She is from a primitive, farming, non-educated background and then she wants to be free so much that she just jumps into this abyss, runs away to Paris to be free and then she is oppressed again by the Yugoslav government forcing her to work for them. Again to have a life of being shackled and not being free. I mean she was ‘free’ as much as you could be as a woman in the fifties doing the job she was doing. The original desire was there. She didn’t escape it. The question is do any of us escape it? Because by the fact of our gender we are locked into certain roles.

This project also has another element which is the **OF** photographic portraits of one hundred muses.

That was also trying to reassemble *L’Inconnue de la Seine*, and **DJ**





Gordana Čavić by looking at one hundred different women but then it became much more than that. It became also about oppression. It is about the relationship of women in Ireland towards their bodies and taking power over the presentation of their bodies, and about shaming of the body. I guess all of these projects could be a distinct exhibition but they all lead to the same questions.

OF You have a residency in Paris later this year. Will you take more images then or will it be a combination of research and writing?

DJ I will take images for sure, but it is really just to finish the book. My plan is to finish the first draft of the novel by February, and then maybe revise it and by the time I get to Paris to do a final edit. And also work on the images. In June or July I will leave the book with a designer to come up with something, and hopefully it will be published in time for the exhibition in November. I don't know where I will get the money...

OF I'm looking around now at some beautiful books in your studio. What are you reading now?

DJ I am reading *The Lacuna*, the South American novel by Barbara Kingsolver. I have an admission, I think after the PhD I kind of lost my desire to read.

OF When researching a doctorate, reading becomes something you *have* to do.





I do love being where the book takes me, but I also find it **DJ**
interferes with my writing. I know that people say you have
to read a lot to write, I read so much up to the PhD point.
But I find when I try to write, what I have read influences
my writing.

You don't want that other voice coming in? **OF**

Maybe some people are not influenced by what they are **DJ**
reading, I think it influences me too much. I get immersed
in a book so much I start thinking or talking in that way.

What books do you go back to? **OF**

Black Lamb and Grey Falcon for sure. I read a lot of poetry. **DJ**
Some of my favourite books of all time are science
fiction. Like *Solaris* by Stanisław Lem, and *Hyperion* by Dan
Simmons. I love science fiction—creating different worlds
and realities. I love Umberto Eco—any book by him except
maybe *Foucault's Pendulum*, which I have tried to read so many
times but never got to the end. It is like an intelligence test.
Dubravka Ugrešić, a Croatian writer, anything she writes is
incredible, absolutely amazing. I would highly recommend
her. There are many ex-Yugoslav writers that are incredible.
I mean, Ivo Andrić, he is a Nobel prize winner. And Miroslav
Krlježa. I go back a lot to those books from my childhood.

Do you read in English? **OF**

I read them lots of times in Croatian, so I am now very **DJ**





curious about translation and what that does to the books. I was thinking about Jacques Prévert, the French surrealist poet. I read him in Serbo-Croatian and it was translated by this incredible Yugoslavian poet called Tin Ujević, so he was a translator and a poet. I was blown away. I mean, I was sixteen as well. It was incredible. And then I came to Ireland and I found English translations of the poems, they were so bad, so juvenile, it was awful. I realised how the art of translation can elevate or destroy a work.

OF It is such an amazing skill. It is one thing to comprehend something but it is another to rewrite with the same tone and feeling.

DJ I think for writers to give their books to be translated is a huge leap of faith and trust.

OF Getting back to *Black Lamb* and Rebecca West, are there any of her contemporaries that you read?

DJ I read books from the same period that were connected to Yugoslavia. Travel writing or even if it was not strictly travel writing. Agatha Christie wrote *The Secret of Chimneys* about some fictionalised Balkan country. That might be a conglomerate of Yugoslavia and maybe Bulgaria, the stereotyping of people and landscape, where the landscape is predominantly mountains and the population are revolutionaries who like killing kings and getting drunk. Then there was *Two Vagabonds in The Balkans* (1925), and that is a book that I really like. It was by a married couple, Jan





and Cora Gordon. It was sweet. It wasn't an amazing piece of literature but it was nice to see Yugoslavia through their eyes. They were also upper class people so their experience of the rural Yugoslavia was quite interesting. I love that Roland Penrose and Lee Miller went to Yugoslavia at the same time that Rebecca West was there. I think they also stayed in the same hotel in Macedonia. He wrote this book, a very small book. A kind of photobook, and it is called *The Road is Wider than Long*, really a love poem to Lee Miller because it was the beginning of their affair. It contains photographs and poetry.

So that is quite a parallel to your work.

OF

It is kind of amazing that they were there at the same time. I don't think they met but they must have known each other from the London literary scene.

DJ

How did you come across this book?

OF

I was directed towards it by my PhD supervisor Ian Walker, because he writes a lot about surrealism, and photography, and the 1930s. If he wasn't so informed that book would probably have escaped me!

DJ