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"Life with an Adaptor, so We Don't Burn Ourselves" The Book, Memory, and the Museum in Dubravka Ugrešić's Poetics of Exile

One of the effects of wars is that they redraw the geographical and political boundaries, giving birth to newer nation states. 'Narration', the 'book' and 'memory' can be the counter-strategies to the destruction of war, in that they keep trace of the old boundaries, at the same time drawing new maps that provide inclusion rather than exclusion.

In this essay, I shall illustrate how the Croatian exile writer Dubravka Ugrešić mingles the technologies of the book, art and memory to keep her "ex-country" – as she names Former Yugoslavia – alive.[1] I shall show that these strategies, which she embraces with self-irony as well as political irony, are essential for her to write about the condition of exile and to survive displacement and dispossession. Together with her country, she lost the values and the material culture that it represented. Ugrešić's novels, published in the aftermaths of the Balkan civil war, are peopled by exiles, expatriates and dislocated characters. Through a close reading of her texts, I shall illustrate her understanding and plural definitions of exile, particularly concentrating on *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender,* the novel where she combines narration and visual art among her numerous interesting writing strategies, and where she creates a photographic album and a true life museum through the stories and the life fragments she portrays.[2]

[1] Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Ministry of Pain* (New York: Harper, 2007), 52.

[2] Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, trans. by Celia Hawkesworth (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998).

Between Asylum and Exile

In the introduction to the Italian translation of Ugrešić's novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the writer Predrag Matvejević, who originally comes from former Yugoslavia, describes Ugrešić's condition as being "between asylum and exile".[3] Ugrešić has never asked for political asylum and considers exile as the natural condition for a writer. She therefore lingers in between the two, always elsewhere, proudly acknowledging her status as a nomad.

Dubravka Ugrešić was born in 1949 in Zagreb, capital of Croatia, which, at that time, was a State within the Federal 'popular' (changed to 'socialist' in 1963) Republic of Yugoslavia. Now Yugoslavia is a thing of the past. It became an "ex-Country", as Ugrešić calls it,[4] and in its place there are now other states. When the Balkan war burst out in the 1990s, Ugrešić was working as a researcher and a teacher in contemporary Russian literature at the prestigious Institute for Literary Sciences of the Faculty of Philosophy of the Zagreb University. She tried to keep a neutral position in regard to the conflict between Croats and Serbs, but her works and articles were not appreciated by the government that began to see her as a

[3] "Tra asilo ed esilio", in Ugrešić, *Il museo della resa incondizionata* (Milano: Bompiani, 2002), 5, my translation. The expression is more suggestive in Italian, as the two terms are phonetically close.

[4] Ugrešić, *The Ministry of Pain*, 52.

dissident. As when, in medieval times, those in power used to burn witches at the stake, the Croatian nationalist propaganda machine tried, with metaphorical fires and other pressures, to silence those intellectuals who were not writing articles praising its work and who dared to openly challenge authority. Ugrešić was one of those dissenting voices, denouncing the lack of alternative information to what was narrowly provided by the government, and accusing it of forging false information and manipulating it in order to maintain political power.[5]

The nationalist propaganda began to exercise pressure against the writers who dared to disagree, Ugrešić included. Ugrešić was soon accused of treason. In 1992, the Croatian journalist Slaven Letica, in an (initially unsigned) article that appeared in the weekly magazine *Globus* and that was entitled "Croatian Feminists Rape Croatia", accused five Croatian women writers of betraying Croatia.[6] He named these women "witches", following the Slav tradition that employed the words *vještica* or *veštica* (signifying "witch") to denigrate women who did not fit into the typical model of the woman under Communism by seeing them as "conniving, ill-intentioned, bitter, secretive, and odd".[7] All these events led Ugrešić to finally quit her land in 1993: "I invested my own money in the purchase of my broom. I fly alone."[8] She first flew to the United States and subsequently to Amsterdam, where she now resides (with regular trips and overseas stays that can last several months, making her into an intellectual nomad). Ugrešić is still attached to the multicultural state of former Yugoslavia, which was and remains her only homeland. Ugrešić regularly visits Croatia, but she has not declared her intention to return there to live and work. After her self-exile, her first public appearance was in Croatia in 2004, to promote her book *The Ministry of Pain*. Although she lives abroad and can speak other languages, Ugrešić writes all her books in Croatian.[9] Her works have been translated into many languages. She has received several literary awards for her writing, which is considered innovative, intelligent, and infused with political and emotional value. These prizes show the international recognition of her work, but they also appear as markers on the map of her nomadic life.

'Life without a Tail': Exile and Memory

As already mentioned, Ugrešić's books written in the wake of the Balkan civil war – *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender, Thank you for Not Reading,*[10] *and The Ministry of Pain* – describe the experience of exile and are peopled by exilic characters – refugees, immigrants, nomads and expatriates whom she meets all around the world. In these texts, the author provides a series of definitions and metaphors for exile, all of which are partial. Exile does not allow for a single, comprehensive definition. To understand it as a whole, we have to compile all the definitions, the stories and the images, the photographs, and the fragments taken from the lives of people she encounters and feels close to.

In Ugrešić's *Thank You for Not Reading*, there is a chapter dedicated to the "Writer in Exile" where the writer gives us the tools to read and interpret exile

[5] Ugrešić complains about this situation, though not without irony, in *The Culture of Lies. Antipolitical Essays* (London: Phoenix, 1998, first published in Croatian in 1995).

[6] The other intellectual women accused of being 'witches' are Slavenka Drakulić, Rada Iveković, Vesna Kesić, Jelena Lovrić: http://womeneuropeanhistory.org/index.php?title=The_Five_Witches, 1 December 2012.

[7] Obrad Kesić, "Women and Gender Imagery in Bosnia: Amazons, Sluts, Victims, Witches, and Wombs", in Sabrina P. Ramet, ed., *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999), 198.

[8] Ugrešić, *The Culture of Lies*, 273.

[9] Before the war, the language spoken in Croatia was called Serbo-Croatian or Croatian-Serbian. In *The Ministry of Pain* Ugrešić criticizes the way in which the new governments destroy their common language, as they have done with their land.

[10] Dubravka Ugrešić, *Thank You For Not Reading* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003).

literature and to understand exile in general.[11] One after the other, she quotes and mingles her definitions with those given by other writers who have been, or still are, in exile. This chapter is the first of Part 5, whose title, "Life without a Tail", plunges into the dimension of exile seen as a condition where there are no milestones, reference points or possibilities of orientation. This is the reason why exile must appeal to memory, the kind of steering wheel that leads and holds the right course of our life. As Brodskij writes: "Memory, I think, is a substitute for the tail that we have lost for good in the happy process of evolution. It directs our movements, including migration. Apart from that there is something clearly atavistic in the very process of recollection, if only because such a process never is linear."[12] The nomad, the exile, the immigrant are usually represented as figures carrying a 'suitcase', the object that symbolizes the nomadic predicament and which also points to the necessity not to travel with cumbersome luggage. Ugrešić challenges this vision of the exile through another image:

> I had a dream. I was at an airport, waiting for someone. Finally the person I was waiting for, a woman of my age, appeared. Before we got into a taxi, I asked her
> "Don't you have any luggage?"
> "No, I just have lifeage", said the woman.
> The sentence my double had spoken could be translated: Life is the only luggage I carry with me.[13]

In Ugrešić's world, the luggage an exile can carry is his/her *life-age*, a neologism through which she conveys the idea that everything we can carry with us, in our displaced routes, is contained in our body and in our souvenirs. Life coincides with memory.

A Book: The Museum of a Life in Exile

The title of the novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* suggests that we should think of it through the metaphor of the museum. The chapters, each of a different length, are indeed like the rooms and the sections in a museum. The chapters with odd numbers (1, 3, 5, and 7) are veritable collections of objects: they consist of numbered paragraphs, like captions next to objects in a museum. They do not tell a single story: they are short sketches, descriptions, images, one different from the next, but linked with one another in some way. Their series reflect the functioning of the human brain, the stream of thoughts. The other chapters in even numbers (2, 4, and 6) are longer and more coherent, and each tells a story. We can consider these longer chapters as monothematic rooms in a museum, organized around a single topic. Apparently, there are no solid links between the different parts; they resemble fragments of a life in exile. It is the reader who must find, create, or recreate the links between the pieces of the puzzle, as the author writes in the prologue. She describes a glass case in the Berlin zoo, which unusually displays the objects found in the stomach of Roland, the walrus:

[11] Ugrešić, *Thank You*, 127-148.

[12] Quoted in Ugrešić, *Museum*, 85.

[13] Ugrešić, *Thank You*, 127.

> The visitor stands in front of the unusual display, more enchanted than horrified, as before archaeological exhibits. The visitor knows that their museum-display fate has been determined by chance (Roland's whimsical appetite) but still cannot resist the poetic thought that with time the objects have acquired some subtler, secret connections. Caught up in this thought, the visitor then tries to establish semantic coordinates, to reconstruct the historical context…
> The chapters and fragments which follow should be read in a similar way. If the reader feels that there are no meaningful or firm connections between them, let him be patient: the connections will establish themselves of their own accord.[14]

[14] Ugrešić, *Museum*, 1.

As Ugrešić states in an interview, this novel follows the principle of a film cutting or a collage of elements.[15] It can be read as an artistic installation, such as those that she reviews in her book. There are no true characters, apart from the 'I' of the narrating voice, which can be identified as the author herself. The protagonist is memory. This explains why the author has chosen a text that resembles a museum to focus on exile. Only through this style can she approach her topic. Exile itself is a style, a narrative strategy. A life in pieces can only be recounted through pieces, fragments, and images.

[15] *Biti Izvan*, Dubravka Ugrešić Pitanja Postavljala Ana Ristović 3-4, http://www.b92.net/casopis_rec/60.6/pdf/111-122.pdf, 3 March 2012.

The story of an exile can be narrated through the series of apartments rented and then left, or through the essential, simple objects one buys over and over and then leaves behind, like a coffee machine or a suitcase. The story of the exile is also recounted by the stamps one has in his/her passport:

> What could I have replied? That exile, or at least the form of it that I was living with increasing weariness, is an immeasurable state. That exile is a state which can admittedly be described in measurable facts – stamps in one's passport, geographical points, distances, temporary addresses, the experience of various bureaucratic procedures for obtaining visas, money spent who knows how often on buying a new suitcase – but such a description hardly means anything. That exile is the history of the things we leave behind, of buying and abandoning hairdryers, cheap little radios, coffee pots …. That exile is changing voltages and kilohertz, life with an adaptor, so we don't burn ourselves. The exile is the history of our temporary rented apartments, the first lonely mornings as we spread out the map of the town in silence, find on the map the name of our street and mark it with a cross in pencil. (We repeat the history of the great conquerors, with little crosses instead of flags.) Those little, firm facts, stamps in our passports, accumulate and at a certain moment they become illegible lines. Then they suddenly begin to trace an inner map, the map of the unreal, the imaginary.[16]

[16] Ugrešić, *Museum*, 119.

The adaptor, the suitcase, the hairdryers and the coffee pots left and bought over and over again, the stamps and the visas in the passports: these objects are the metaphors of exile. In her words, "exile is a lesson in adaptation".[17] Exile is a mosaic of languages, places, nations/nationalities visited and encountered elsewhere – it is a displacement of nationalities. Nations are displaced through their citizens who travel around the world, and re-build their homeland wherever they happen to land. Therefore, exile gives a sense of disorientation and confusion – feelings that are increased in the encounter with other de-localized individuals. If the intensity of the movement and the de-localization of people in the world

[17] Ugrešić, *Thank You*, 136.

today has reached very high levels, in walking in the streets of a particular city, one cannot avoid the impression of being elsewhere. Neighborhoods in one city become the holograms of other places:

> Berlin is a mutant city. Berlin has its Western and its Eastern face: sometimes the Western one appears in East Berlin, and the Eastern one in West Berlin. The face of Berlin is criss-crossed by the hologram reflections of some other cities. If I go to Kreuzberg I shall arrive in a corner of Istanbul, if I travel by S-bahn to the edges of Berlin, I can be sure I shall reach the outskirts of Moscow.[18]

[18] Ugrešić, *Museum*, 110.

In exile, all nations and nationalities are mixed. Nations travel through spoken languages and through the coffee bars that one can find in the least expected places:

> In Kantstrasse, where Russian is spoken in many places, there is a Café Paris. On Savignyplatz there is the Café Kant, right next to the Café Hegel. Hegel is written in Latin script on one side of the sign, and on the other in Cyrillic. The Cyrillic side faces the neighbouring brothel. In East Berlin there is Café Pasternak. The windows of the Pasternak look on to an imposing round structure made of red brick, a water tower. The tower served as one of the 'handy' prisons for Berlin Jews. In Kreuzberg there is the Café Exile. On the other side of the street, separated from it by a canal, is the Café Konsulat.[19]

[19] Ibid., 111.

The two Cafés Exile and Konsulat are one in front of the other, as ironic and sad reminders of the inextricable link between exile and the inexhaustible administrative and bureaucratic procedures that exiles have to go through.

Another condition of exile is the perpetual looking for home and the impossibility to return home. Home and the wall are the elements we find in both Ugrešić's life and Christa's, a woman she meets in New York. Christa and Dubravka seem to have parallel lives, both characterized by the impossibility to return somewhere that could be called 'home':

> In those two and a half kitchen-months I discovered that Christa was tormented by two nightmares. They were both connected in a double knot, but one was insoluble and the other, at least from my perspective, soluble. The name of the first, insoluble, one was the Berlin Wall, and the name of the other, soluble, one was old-fashioned but none the less painful: home. Around them, like large spools, Christa wound the taut threads of her life.[20]

[20] Ibid., 143.

The idea of a wall and the idea of looking for a home are common elements of the two biographies, Dubravka's and Christa's, which have been "joined by nothing other than Sally's general grasp of geography".[21] Dubravka does not have a home, because it was swept away by the civil war. She changes places, jobs, and houses, and in this she is like Christa, who changes countries, houses, and lovers whenever she seems to have found one. Christa's home has been destroyed by the fall of the Berlin Wall. She cannot go back to Berlin because she does not recognize her old city. On the other hand, in the heart of the old nation Yugoslavia, there is

[21] Ibid., 142.

a border, an invisible wall that is more terrible than any visible one, because it was erected in the hearts of people, and separates them from one another.

The two women are doomed to travel through lands and countries without the possibility to find home again. Since her escape from former Yugoslavia, Ugrešić has lived in a state of exile, like a nomad. She wanders through the world, changes countries, apartments and kitchens. Hers is a life on the move. Places elapse before your eyes, but you cannot grasp them, you cannot stop long enough to make a new home. No place becomes home; it can only play the part of a temporary host for the exile, who passes through it, in a perpetual renewal of daily actions repeated time and time again. The person in exile is just a passerby: as in airports or stations, the exile traverses a series of places, corridors, waiting halls, maybe waiting for a better future. All these places are impersonal and look the same, as the waiting rooms and the lounges in airports and train stations. They offer no sense of belonging. They are no-man's lands, in-between spaces, spaces of transit, as Rosi Braidotti beautifully describes in her *Nomadic Subjects*: "stations and airport lounges, trams, shuttle buses, and check-in areas. In between zones where all ties are suspended and time stretched to a sort of continuous present. Oasis of nonbelonging, spaces of detachment. No-(wo)man's lands."[22]

In these spaces time seems not to exist, suspended and flowing differently from "home", from the places one has left. Contrary to what can be imagined, these transit areas are also densely populated – as Ugrešić comments, "Europe was full of people like me".[23] The in-between status is not a pleasant condition, as it gives the feeling of permanent exclusion, and of not belonging. In Braidotti's words, such transit zones as, for instance, the European community, "is crowded at the margins, and nonbelonging can be hell".[24]

[22] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 18-19.

[23] Ugrešić, *Museum*, 148.

[24] Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 20.

Memory and Photography: The Poetics of the Album

The novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is built around a poetics of the family album, as suggested by the first chapter of Part II.[25] It is a poetics of the detail, of the fragment, of the snapshots we take through life, and that we connect through memory. They reflect the functioning of memory, as if, without the photos, memories would be doomed to vanish. Memory is not linear; it proceeds in associations of ideas and images. Ugrešić defines photography as

[25] Ugrešić, "The Poetics of the Album", *Museum*, 15.

> a reduction of the endless and unmanageable world to a little rectangle. A photograph is our measure of the world. A photograph is also memory. Remembering means reducing the world to little rectangles. Arranging the little rectangles in an album is autobiography.
> Between the two genres, the family album and autobiography, there is undoubtedly a connection: the album is a material autobiography, autobiography is a verbal album.[26]

[26] Ugrešić, *Museum*, 30.

The photographs are our memories, which in order to take on a meaning, need to be rearranged in albums, museums and narrations. Life is so dense that it would

be unmanageable without a selection of the memories to be remembered. Does memory exist without photographs? Is it possible to remember the details, the faces, and the places besides those we take snapshots of?

> During one trip abroad I bought a cheap automatic camera, and once the object was already there I shot several films. After some time I looked through the photographs and established that the scenes I had photographed where all I remembered of that journey. I tried to remember something else, but my memories stayed tenaciously fixed on the contents of the photographs.
> I wondered what I would have remembered and how much if I had not taken any picture.[27]

[27] Ibid., 23.

It seems that Ugrešić's answer to my questions is 'no'. She seems to say that memory needs technology to be 'saved' somewhere: photography or narration can provide a meaning to the fragments that are scattered in memory. Like photography, memory too is selective and it cannot contain everything. Memory contains details, a kind of summary of the real life: "What memory has in common with art is the knack for selection, the taste for detail. … Memory contains precise details, not the whole picture; highlights, if you will, not the entire show."[28]

[28] Ibid., 55.

Through the selection of the visual field of a picture, we give an order to the infinite world that would otherwise be impossible to grasp. This is related to the difference between looking and seeing: we can see and understand the world only when we apply a perspective, when we look at it through a viewpoint. To make sense of the world, it would be enough to curl one's fingers around one's eyes or look through the small paper tube in the form of a telescope, as children normally do:

> I remember that as children we used to curl our fingers into a 'telescope', put them to our eyes and with a special jokingly threatening intonation announce to our partner in the game or those in the game or those around us: 'I see you!' Later we replaced our hands with paper tubes. The tubes reduced the boundless and unmanageable world, to a little piece of world to something bounded and manageable, to a little piece of world, a little circle, a frame. The little tube presupposed choice (I can examine this or that). Broken down into little circles, the world through the white paper tunnel reached the eye in sharpened beauty. The jokingly threatening exclamation – I see you! – acquired its full meaning. Through the little tube one really could see, without the tube one only looked. With the help of a single paper tube one could achieve the desired measure of the world, the photograph.[29]

[29] Ibid., 29-30.

"Was ist Kunst?": Memory, Art, and Literature

"Was ist Kunst?" is the title of the fifth part of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. This section, like the first, the third and the seventh, is composed of numbered paragraphs. Here, Ugrešić interrogates 'art' and its possible function. According to the author, art (this term includes all the arts: plastic, visual and the literary) is the means by which the artist seeks to find the relationships between the things in the world. Art creates the links between the fragments of life; it helps navigate through the scattered pieces which make up the mosaic of the world.

In other words, art is a technology to survive in the ocean of dispersed scraps of life: "'Was ist Kunst?' I ask a colleague. 'Art is an endeavour to defend the wholeness of the world, the secret connection between all things'."[30] Through art, the details get their place in the web of life, and they relate to other details. This book, therefore, as the author says, is itself an attempt to give an order to the fragments that make up Ugrešić's life: it gathers all the people and friends whom she met in the street and who had some importance for her. This text is also a hypertext: it shows/creates different links every time you read it, because its elements refer to each other, in a continuous repetition. The reader can choose to follow a certain path rather than another, and jump from one page to another without necessarily following the order of the pages. There is a strong bond between life and art.

[30] Ibid., 169.

This book also looks like one of the installations created by Richard, an English artist who lives in Berlin. Ugrešić engages in deep discussions with him, and visits his apartment, full of artistic works and experiences. Similarly to Richard's installations, this book consists of pieces of all kinds: pieces of paper (photos, quotations from books, the pages of passports and visas), rooms in rented apartments, the waiting rooms in different consulates, where exiles wait long hours to get their visa, the airport lounges and the suitcases that accompany the life of the exile. It is a postmodern book that can be compared to a contemporary work of art looking like the real life it seeks to rebuild. At the same time, it could also represent just the opposite: isn't it rather the real life that tries to look like a work of art? Ugrešić agrees with Russian writer Isaak Babel: "'There is no reason why a well thought-out story should resemble real life; life strives with all its might to resemble a well thought-out story', wrote Babel."[31] The connection between life and art/museum is, however, repeated several times: "All of us here are museum exhibits…", says Zoran almost at the end of the novel.[32] A little earlier, there is another remark about life and art: sometimes people do not pay enough attention to daily life, to what happens before their eyes. Real life becomes valuable when it becomes art; in other words, when it is 'exposed' as a piece in a museum:

[31] Ibid., 222

[32] Ibid., 231.

> In some places the Wall still stands, thin and dry as Jewish matzos. Here and there, as in the courtyard of the Europe-Center, the piece of wall has been put under museum glass. Visitors to the shopping center stop in front of the glass-covered piece with interest, as though they were seeing it for the first time.[33]

[33] Ibid., 233.

This note reveals a vein of criticism towards that society, which is interested in things only when they are exposed and shown with a high media profile, as it happens with wars.

Memory and War

Although war does not specifically appear in the novel, it is its constant concern. The civil war in the 90s, that broke apart the Republic of former Yugoslavia, is the direct cause for the current predicaments in which the characters of this novel

have to live. They cannot forget it, because their life is a direct consequence of it. This is the reason why memory, not war, will eventually win. War, in truth, is meant to erase the memory of individuals, peoples and nations. Still, memory survives, recalling and creating links among places and peoples:

> There is a story told about the war criminal Ratko Mladić, who spent months shelling Sarajevo from the surrounding hills. Once he noticed an acquaintance's house in the next target. The general telephoned his acquaintance and informed him that he was giving him five minutes to collect his 'albums', because he had decided to blow his house up. When he said 'albums', the murderer meant the albums of family photographs. The general, who had been destroying the city for months, knew precisely how to annihilate memory. That is why he 'generously' bestowed on his acquaintance life with the right to remembrance. Bare life and a few family photographs.[34]

[34] Ibid., 7.

The Balkan wars of the 1990s destroyed the community of the peoples who had formed the Federation of Yugoslavia. That war erased a whole Country from maps and made passports useless; it transformed a country into a 'former country', and its citizens into 'former citizens':

> I travelled to Lisbon with a huge amount of luggage, or entirely without luggage, depending on how you looked at it. I had lost my homeland. I had not yet got used to the loss, nor to the fact that my homeland was the same, but different. In just one year I had lost my home, my friends, my job, the possibility of returning soon, but also the desire to return.… At forty-five years old I found myself in the world with a bag containing the most essential items, as though the world were a bomb shelter. My memories of the shelter, where I used to go with my fellow-countrymen during the air-raid warmings, were still fresh.[35]

[35] Ibid., 148.

Conclusion

To understand Ugrešić's vision of exile, the reader should compile all the definitions, the stories and the images, the photographs and the sketches that are scattered in her books, and find the links between them. Remembering, even through fragments and images, is important. It is also important to have institutions such as museums and literary texts that can ensure the preservation of memory from wearing. Often, governments and powers assume the right to rewrite history, to confiscate or to destroy memory through censorship, propaganda and war. Narration, the book and the museum can represent the technologies that save memory by keeping it alive. They also provide exiled communities with the ways in which they might locate themselves in the unknown world through unknown routes.

Exile is life with the adaptor always at hand, says Dubravka Ugrešić, "so we don't burn ourselves".[36] Armed with the technological device, exile people travel through the world, constantly adapting to new conditions, new environments, and new languages. The exile is forced to adapt, to negotiate and to compromise with the new space in order to survive. Exile provides a style, a technique to remember and arrange the scattered pieces of a broken life in a narrative unity, whether material or verbal. Still, if time in exile has a different flow from time at home, this order cannot be chronological, but adaptable and portable.

[36] Ibid., 119.