

## Café Europa

Slavenka Drakulic has done it again. *Café Europa* takes seemingly small, everyday details and skews them into grand generalities to stretch across Eastern Europe. In reading her previous work, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, I remember finding her analogies to be interesting. A doll that's too perfect to be touched or played with betrays its function. A communal washroom will eventually break down and never be fixed because no one person has responsibility for its upkeep. The critique discussed in lecture changed my mind about Drakulic's style. A child wanting a shiny new doll is not culturally specific to Eastern Europe. While her examples fit the point she was trying to make, they are not exclusive to Eastern Europe and communism.

In reading *Café Europa* Drakulic uses the same writing style of stretching small examples to fit a larger generality. However, I found the everyday examples to be more cultural restricted in this book. Drakulic prefaces with a short explanation of her use of the first person singular. From an anthropological perspective this point emphasizes an arching theme of the book; the separation of "us" from "them". In an effort to purge communism from Eastern European countries, it seems like "they" (Eastern Europe) did not try to create a new identity, rather they tried to superficially take on the appearance of "us" (the Western world). The first chapter draws out the novelty of everything pseudo-Western. The simple act of changing what something is called is enough to excite the hope that it has changed. Drakulic makes the example that a child riding a broomstick will tell you without hesitation that he or she is riding a horse. "It is as if by merely calling something by another name, you are able to transform it into what you want it to be...no one has yet told the infant Eastern Europe that a wooden stick is not a horse (p.10)." An Eastern European coffee shop by the name Café Europa is an example of this attempt.

Drakulic writes briefly on Zoe's bathroom in one of Ceaușescu's villas. Pink toilet, sink, tub, and tiles topped with heavy golden taps. She compares this to a hotel room that tries to present their guest with a particular idea of what elegance is. In the case of Zoe's bathroom, the combination of so many luxurious things actually takes away from the elegance of the room. Over emphasis betrays the mimicking façade and the whole scene seems absurd. The physical appearance, while symbolic and representative, is not the only element of that representation. In this case, the process and effort contribute greatly to the end picture.

Zoe's bathroom was obviously a conscious effort to portray status. Like this bathroom, everyone makes an effort to define themselves through external appearance. It's why we do/don't brush our hair, buy name brand clothes, and apply makeup. Drakulic recalls her culture shock of being America. She first visited the United States in 1983. "This is when I noticed that Americans were obsessed by their teeth (p. 126)." Culture shock describes the anxiety of assimilating into a new society often surrounded by feelings of confusion or disgust. It often times hinders an understanding of the new culture and further emphasizes the difference between oneself and the other. I find Drakulic's hang up on toothpaste to be interesting because American's have variety in almost every consumer product. *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* gives intimate details on how women in Eastern Europe under communism could rarely find feminine products, much less have a variety of them. I would have thought the commercialism and variety of feminine products would have been her culture shock. There are ones for light days, average and heavy days. There are ones for sports, with plastic, paper, or beaded applicators. The same story plot applies to shampoos. There are ones for blonde, red, straight, frizzy, greasy, or color treated hair. You name it and there's a shampoo for it.

Drakulic says American's are obsessed with toothpaste. However, when she returns from America the obsession attaches itself to her. She finds herself unable to overt her stares and realizes just how bad her country's dental healthcare is. In the Western world we have to pay for our dental work and so a perfectly healthy smile represents wealth and social status. Yet in Eastern Europe dental work has been free for the last forty years. Private dentists who provide better service are available, but people do not see their teeth as a priority. Instead they chose to fix their cars, buy new dishes, carpets, or drapes.

Eastern Europe after communism seems to carry a stigma of inferiority. There is still a differentiation between us and them. This stigma seems to be self-inflicted. Changing the names and physical attributes of businesses, homes, and even one's own body to mimic those of the Western world betrays the want to be like them. The act of make belief that one is in a Europa coffee shop is so pleasing to an Eastern European that the most popular coffee shop chain changed its name to Café Europa. This is a common phenomenon. Stores like Target, Bonjour, and Lady have sprung up all over the East. The government of extremely nationalist countries protests their outrage of such subtle activities. However, the government cannot conceal the fantasies of its citizens. Ceaușescu actually deceived this want in a more obvious way. Zoe's bathroom's exaggerated imitation of Western luxury and elegance conveys the same message. They wanted to live the fantasy of Western comfort. Drakulic's culture shock of American dental hygiene could be interesting to track in the future. For now, dental work is free in Eastern Europe and people don't see the need to pay for better quality work. Could a set of perfect pearly white be the next image to mimic? Perhaps as Eastern Europeans continue to make strides in their jobs and become more financially stable, a perfect smile will become a new external factor to identify wealth. In reading *Café Europa* I found myself thinking that communism left Eastern Europe

without an identity. The answer to this problem seems to be an impersonation of what they fantasize for their future; Western luxury.