

The fox and the spider as symbolic representations of metafiction and hypertextuality in *Fox* by Dubravka Ugrešić.


El zorro y la araña como representaciones simbólicas de la metaficción y la
hipertextualidad en *Zorro* de Dubravka Ugrešić.

DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31.e0202

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Received: 07/10/2025

Review: 10/11/2025

Approval: 27/12/2025

Abstract:

In this essay, I aim to show that Dubravka Ugrešić engages in a hypertextual dialogue in her novel *Zorro* (2017) with the story *A Tale of How Stories Are Written* (1926) by Boris Pilniak, from whom she recovers the metaphorical link between the fox and writers through two attributes of the fox: treachery and audacity. Betrayal in the sense of writers scrutinising and revealing the lives of those around them. And audacity understood as the ability of writers to capture a personal story from a web of genres and literary resources. On the other hand, *Zorro* is also a metafictional narrative in which Ugrešić reflects on how stories are written. At this point, she draws on a variety of discursive genres – such as anecdote, short story, and memoir – and adopts the symbolic meaning between the spider and its web to refer to the link between writer and literary work. In this way, I see a double link between Dubravka Ugrešić's *Zorro* and Boris Pilniak's *A Story About How Stories Are Written*: hypertextual and metafictional.

Keywords: Hypertextuality, metafiction, symbol, metaphor, Yugoslav literature.

Resumen:

En este ensayo me propongo mostrar que Dubravka Ugrešić entabla un diálogo hipertextual en su novela *Zorro* (2017) con el relato *Un cuento sobre cómo se escriben los cuentos* (1926) de Boris Pilniak, de quien recupera el vínculo metafórico entre el zorro y los escritores a través de dos atributos del vulpino: la traición y la audacia. Traición en el sentido de escudriñamiento y revelación que hacen los escritores de la vida de quienes los rodean. Y la audacia entendida como la habilidad de los escritores para plasmar una historia personal a partir de un entramado de géneros y recursos literarios. Por otra parte, *Zorro* también se trata de una narración metafictional en la que Ugrešić reflexiona acerca de cómo se escriben los cuentos. En este punto, recurre a

una variedad de géneros discursivos –como la anécdota, el relato, las memorias– y adopta el sentido simbólico entre la araña y su red para referirse al lazo entre escritor y obra literaria. De este modo, advierto un doble vínculo de la obra *Zorro* de Dubravka Ugrešić con *Un cuento sobre cómo se escriben los cuentos* de Boris Pilniak: hipertextual y metaficcional.

Palabras clave: Hipertextualidad, metaficción, símbolo, metáfora, literatura yugoslava

This (...) is not a story about me (...) and the tricks that our fragile memory plays on us, but a story that strives to tell a tale, which in turn attempts to tell a tale about how tales are created.

Dubravka Ugrešić

Dubravka Ugrešić was born in Kutina, a village near Zagreb, in the former Yugoslavia, in 1949. For several years she was a professor of Comparative and Russian Literature at the University of Zagreb. She experienced the relegation of women both in society and in literature, a theme that some of her books reflect, such as *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2008). When the war of independence broke out in Yugoslavia in 1991, she criticised Serbian and Croatian nationalism as retrograde, a stance that made her the target of severe attacks and forced her into exile in the Netherlands in 1993.

The event that marks her life and work is the disappearance of Yugoslavia. In this sense, her narrative warns of the dangers of cultural homogenisation and forced exile. She also "positions herself as a 'post-national' writer and champions the right of authors not to recognise or respect ethnic and national borders, especially in cases where these are being imposed by force, as they are in her case [She positions herself as a 'post-national' writer and defends the right of authors not to recognise or respect ethnic and national borders, especially in cases where these are imposed by force, as in her case.]" (About Dubravka Ugrešić, n.d., para. 2).

The works of avant-garde Russian authors such as Mikhail Bulgakov, Isaac Babel, Boris Pilnyak, Yuri Olesha, Mikhail Zoshchenko, and Andrei Platonov were decisive in her development as a storyteller. This influence can be seen in her constant references to these authors, in the dialogue she maintains with them through her works, as well as in "the autonomy of the text, montage as a principle, [and] the de-hierarchisation of genres" (Casals, 2021, para. 2). On the other hand, I note a constant interest that runs through Ugrešić's work from her first book, *Pose for Prose*, published in 1978, to one of her last, *Zorro*, published in 2017: intertextuality and meta-literature. She died on 17 March 2023 in Amsterdam.

In this paper, I propose to highlight three aspects of *A Story About How Stories Are Created*—the first part of Zorro—which emerge from a hypertextual dialogue between Ugrešić and Boris Pilniak. The first of these is the analogy between the fox and the writer, presented by Pilniak in his story *A Story About How Stories Are Written* Based on Audacity and Betrayal. The second comprises Ugrešić's response—from a metafictional game—to the question of how stories are written. The third and final analogy refers to the skill and creativity of Ugrešić's textual framework, an aspect that metaphorically links her to the weaving spider.

The Hypotext and the Hypertext

Dubravka Ugrešić bases her novel on Boris Pilniak's short story, which places us before what Gerard Genette refers to as a transtextual relationship, specifically hypertextuality, characterised by the insertion of text A – which he calls the hypotext – into a later text B – which he calls the hypertext. It should be noted that the insertion is carried out through a process of transformation. In other words, hypertextuality is a 'second-degree text (...) or a text derived from another pre-existing text' (Genette, 1989, p. 14). In this sense, Pilniak's *A Story About How Stories Are Written* constitutes the hypotext that gives rise to and is simultaneously inserted into Ugrešić's hypertext *A Story About How Stories Are Created*.

In 1926, Boris Pilniak published *A Story About How Stories Are Written*, a story in which he explores the process of composing stories, not in the manner of an essay such as Edgar Allan Poe's *Philosophy of Composition*, nor by proposing a set of rules such as Horacio Quiroga's *Decalogue of the Perfect Storyteller*, but by narrating a story that tells the love story between a Russian woman –Sofia Gnedj– and a Japanese writer –Tagaki–, as well as the latter's subsequent betrayal of his wife.

In the story about Sofia and Tagaki, Pilniak presents the fox as treacherous and daring, characteristics that allow him, on the one hand, to establish a close metaphorical link between her and the writer; on the other hand, to consider her as a deity¹ of writers. In this sense, Pilniak makes an important warning at the beginning and end of his story: "if the spirit of the fox penetrates a man, that

¹ Ann Wroe comments that Dionysus was worshipped in Thrace as Bassareus, who took the form of a cunning fox and whose priests were characterised by wearing a cap made of the animal's skin, "as well as [by] jumping and kicking in the dark, drinking heavily and making prophecies to achieve union with Dionysus himself" (p. 16). For more information, see the section Second string: trees in Wroe, A. (2019). *Orpheus. The song of life*. Barcelona: Ediciones La Llave.

man's race is cursed" (1997, p. 122). Below, I present the analogy between the writer and the fox, and explain the symbolic meaning that Ugrešić attributes to the fox's betrayal and audacity in Pilniak's story.

The Betrayal of the Fox in Pilniak

Based on the symbolic meaning that various cultures attribute to the fox as bold and treacherous, Dubravka Ugrešić explicitly establishes in the first part of her fictionalised biography *Fox* – the hypertext – the link that Pilniak implicitly and metaphorically suggests in *A Story About How Stories Are Written* – the hypotext – between the fox and the writer, after identifying two betrayals in the Russian writer's narrative. The first betrayal is at the level of the story: it is committed by Tagaki towards his wife Sofia Gnedyj. The second is committed by Pilniak when he betrays his protagonist Sofia.

With regard to the first, Tagaki—influenced by the fox—betrays Sofia when he makes her the protagonist of his novel and, under this pretext, delves into his wife's emotions and describes some of their intimate encounters, albeit without her consent. This betrayal represents a violation of Sofia's privacy and trust, to the point that it motivates her to leave her husband. Pilniak refers to it as follows: "[Sofia] understood everything, that was where the horror began; it was an excessively cruel betrayal of everything she believed in" (1997, p. 121).

With regard to the second, Pilniak betrays his protagonist Sofia by revealing information and details he obtains from the autobiography – a first-hand source – that she writes as part of the requirements she believes are being asked of her for her extradition. This document is extremely valuable because it sheds light on how Sofía perceives herself, beyond the literary character that Tagaki first and Pilniak later create for her. In this context, the act of betrayal represents an essential tool for the writer to explore human experiences.

The Audacity of the Fox in Pilniak

As a writer belonging to the avant-garde of the early 20th century, Boris Pilniak pays special attention to writing resources and procedures, as well as to experimenting with the scope and possibilities of literary language, a path that leads him to metafiction, a resource that, in Gil González's terms, consists of 'the exhibition of the artificial nature of the literary work' (2001, p. 43). In other words, it is a narrative that "reflects critically or theoretically on the narrative conventions involved in the construction of the novel in progress" (Sobejano–Morán, 2003, p. 23).

Returning to Pilniak's interest in the literary process of composition, I see in it the characteristic audacity of the fox in three ways. The first example of audacity is the writing of a metafictional story, which, according to Gil González, "represents, in fictionalised form, the process of its own writing" in which "the novel alludes to the novel itself, thus becoming the content of the narrative" (2001, p. 57). In other words, there is a shift in interest: from the story and the configuration of the characters to the strategies involved in shaping the story and characters. To illustrate this, I quote what Pilniak says about the way she characterises her characters: "To tell the truth, I am following the usual method: completing the characters of the protagonists with descriptions of nature" (1997, p. 109).

Pilniak delves into the description of Sofia, following the above method with a certain irony. I quote his words below:

But if we can apply the literary rule according to which the characters of the protagonists are complemented by descriptions of nature, then let us say that this girl, like a poem – God forgive us! – a little silly, was clean and clear as the sky, the sea and the rocks of the Russian Far East coast. (1997, p. 110).

A second example of the fox's ingenuity and sagacity is Pilniak's skilful orchestration of three different perspectives on her protagonist, Sofia. One is that which Sofia records in her autobiography and from which she expresses herself directly, although she focuses on recounting the events that make up her life rather than on internalising it. Another is captured by Tagaki in his novel and is characterised by the revelation of details about Sofia's emotions and feelings. The last perspective belongs to Pilniak, who is the most distant from the previous two, a fact that allows him to interpret Sofia's life, feelings and emotions.

As a third form of audacity, Pilniak and Tagaki write about Sofia but avoid anecdotes or recollections about themselves, especially Tagaki, who is extremely reserved as a husband, but as a writer meditated "on time, on thoughts and on his wife's body" (Pilniak, 1997, p. 121). Up to this point, I have referred to the audacity and betrayal of the fox that Ugrešić identifies in the hypotext, which is Pilniak's story. Next, I will refer to the attributes of the fox present in the hypertext, Ugrešić's narrative.

The Betrayal of the Fox in Ugrešić

Ugrešić takes the metaphorical link between the fox and writers proposed by Pilniak further, as she proves herself to be as cunning as a fox in her betrayal, that is, in revealing an intimate side of Pilniak,

his mother and even herself. First, Ugrešić betrays Pilniak every time she narrates what he did not write. She writes a short biography of him in which she recounts some of his trips abroad, his three marriages, and his arrest and subsequent execution. Ugrešić also writes about Pilniak's son, Boris Andronikashvili, whom she met and exchanged letters with for a time, and about Kira, the granddaughter who publishes her grandfather's correspondence.

Of the various anecdotes that Ugrešić collects about Pilniak's life, there is one that seals the betrayal of the Russian writer: the claim that Yuri Miyamoto refers to in her novel *Mojones*, that Pilniak – Polniak in the novel – had tried to rape her during a party in Moscow. It is not Miyamoto who betrays the Russian writer, she merely writes her testimony, but Ugrešić, by taking up the Japanese writer's accusation. In this way, like a fox prowling in the dark, Ugrešić delves into Pilniak's life in search of facts to write about.

Secondly, Ugrešić betrays her mother – who was born in 1926, the same year Pilniak published the aforementioned story – by writing about one of the first deceptions she suffered. Ugrešić's mother was twenty years old when a sailor led her to believe that he was engaged to her and made her travel by train to Zagreb, but he never showed up at the station. Although her mother never saw the sailor again, she did meet the man who would become her husband and, years later, the writer's father. Up to this point, Ugrešić does nothing that Tagaki, Pilniak's character, did not do with regard to Sofia.

Thirdly, Ugrešić ventures into territory that neither Pilniak nor Tagaki approached: the narration of personal experiences. Ugrešić recounts her first trip to Moscow, her interaction with European students at the Moscow State University residence, and the tortuous procedure for consulting books at the Lenin Library. She also writes about the importance of Russia in her life and education, as well as her trips to Japan, as if following in the footsteps of her predecessor, Pilniak. And she does not miss the opportunity to mention how industries such as manga and anime represent the fox.

But the point at which Dubravka Ugrešić commits the greatest betrayal of herself is when she writes about the red-haired, green-eyed man and her brief but intense romance with him in Moscow, as well as their subsequent encounters in Zagreb. Unlike Pilniak and Tagaki, Ugrešić not only puts the spotlight on her characters, but also directs it towards herself as she turns her experiences into the subject of her writing. Pilniak and her characters are, for our writer, as fascinating subjects of observation and reflection as she herself is. In Ugrešić's writing, no one escapes the fox's treacherous gaze, not even herself.

I interpret the fox's betrayal in Ugrešić as a metaphor for the writer, for just as the fox possesses an instinct for survival in hostile environments, during the creative process, the writer may betray those close to him for the sake of the story he is writing.

The Spider in Ugrešić

Before specifying how Ugrešić and the fox are linked through audacity, I will mention the main quality that our writer shares with the spider: that of weaving. From the symbolic meanings that Cirlot, Biedermann, Chevalier, and Gheerbrant confer on the spider in their respective dictionaries, I draw on the insect's creative faculty, as well as the deep connection it establishes with the result of its creation: the web, which refers to the warp and weft.

For Martín Alonso, the warp consists of the "set of threads that are placed on the loom parallel to each other" (1947, p. 4093), while the weft is the threads that are intertwined with the warp, resulting in a fabric or weave. According to Chevalier and Gheerbrant, weaving is a work of creation and birth in the sense that: "To weave is to create new forms" (1986, p. 1516).

One of the first attributes of the spider in Dubravka Ugrešić's work is her ingenious handling of the plot and the warp and weft, an activity of great complexity in her work. In the first part of the novel *Zorro*, Ugrešić intertwines various stories from two realms: the real and the fictional. Among the stories from the real world are: an anecdote about the writer's mother, the story of Ugrešić's relationship with a young Slavic man, and her memories of her trip to Russia, among others.

On the other hand, the story that has a fictional origin, and at the same time constitutes the thread of the weave, is: *A story about how Pilniak's stories are written*. A skill in which, as Casals rightly points out, "she tends to weave her texts with the subtlety of a fabric" (2021, paragraph 4). In the following quote, Ugrešić illustrates that, thanks to the warp, unrelated and almost disparate stories are woven together in the same narrative:

Pilniak wrote *A Story About How Stories Are Written* in 1926. The same year my mother was born. A year in which many things happened that could be ingeniously and skilfully interwoven with my mother's biography [...] Two decades later [...] in 1946, my mother [...] embarked on the journey of her life. (2019, pp. 24-25).

Ugrešić also mentions the different meanings that cultures attribute to thread and fabric. In the following story about her mother, she alludes to one of the oldest symbolic meanings of thread as destiny:

When buying the train ticket, Mum buys a ticket for a journey into the unknown. By choosing that journey and not another, the thread of her destiny, which seemed to be already mapped out, along with the signposts and railway stations, in the lines of her palm, begins to unravel. (2019, p. 25).

Another meaning that Ugrešić presents around thread comes from the cultural imagination. She recalls that when she was a teenager, loose threads in young women's clothing were associated with thoughts that a young man had about the wearer of the thread: blond if the thread was light, or dark if it was a dark thread. Regarding this fact, Ugrešić notes that she has not found threads on anyone's clothing since, but she is certain that these are not only found on garments or only connect the living to each other, but that: "The threads are soul and breath, with them travel the souls of the living and the dead, they get inside us, under our fingernails, and so all of us, without knowing it, are connected" (2019, p. 57).

Based on the above, Ugrešić shares with the spider the creation of a web. More specifically, in *A Story About How Stories Are Created*, she intertwines different discursive forms, including: the biographies of Pilniak and Boris Andronikashvili; anecdotes and memories relating to Ugrešić's experiences; descriptions of the symbolism of the fox in cultures such as Russian and Japanese; personal notes; reflections on how stories are written; as well as elements of literary criticism, as she comments on Pilniak's story.

Before continuing with the fox, it is worth noting the way in which our writer weaves together the aforementioned stories. Rather than a subtle and delicate interweaving, she shows the connections between the discursive genres. The result is a kind of *patchwork* or *quilt*, made up of fabrics with different patterns, prints and colours that, in many cases, reveal the points where they are joined together. In this sense, the style of Ugrešić's writing is as important as the subject matter.

Just as a spider weaves its web with skill and patience, Ugrešić constructs her stories by spinning, through language, a complex web of meanings, metaphors and symbols that capture the essence of human experience. This ability to weave elaborate and engaging narratives reflects the writer's creativity and skill as a wordsmith.

The Fox's Cunning in Ugrešić

The importance of language in Ugrešić's work is largely due to the fact that the literary tradition that influences her is, as in Pilniak, the avant-garde movement. Among the various forms of metafiction found in the first part of *Zorro* are Ugrešić's reflections on language. In this regard, she expresses her disenchantment with the little value attributed to words in this second millennium, which, compared to the value they had in Pilniak's time, has diminished considerably, as she puts it: 'Pilniak lived in a time when the literary word was strong and important [...] Now I live in an era in which words are marginalised' (Ugrešić, 2019, p. 40).

Another form of metafiction is Ugrešić's research into the possible sources that may have inspired Pilniak's story. In this regard, she finds that, according to translator and scholar Kyoko Numano, it is possible that Junichiro Tanizaki's novel *Naomi* – translated as *The Love of a Fool* – is the work that inspired *A Story About How Stories Are Written*, as it was published in 1925 and Pilniak arrived in Japan in 1926, when the novel was a literary success.

We also find another characteristic of metafiction in Ugrešić's reflection on how stories are written. She wonders whether it has to do with a kind of balance between what the narrative shows and what it suggests, or whether it has more to do with the way it is structured. In other words, does a good story consist of an entertaining plot, or does it have a novel structure? I quote Ugrešić's words: 'Where does the secret of a well-told story lie? In the play of light and shadow, of the concealed and the revealed, of the expressed and the unspoken? Or, according to formalist terminology, in the organisation of the material?' (2019, p. 55).

Furthermore, Ugrešić is fully aware that Pilniak is to her what Tagaki and Sofia are to the Russian writer: a pretext for developing a story and reflecting on the creation of these stories. Ugrešić expresses it as follows: "Is Pilniak's story as valuable to me as Sofia's short autobiography and Tagaki's novel were to Pilniak?" (2019, p. 56). This quote highlights the metafictional nature of Ugrešić's narrative, not only because of her reflections on writing, but also because, while writing a story, she writes about her creative process.

In Ugrešić's novel, the analogy between her and the fox, based on audacity, refers to the writer's ability and ingenuity in finding solutions to the narrative and stylistic problems that arise during the creative process.

Conclusion

Dubravka Ugrešić combines the treachery and audacity of the fox with the creativity and skill of the spider when weaving her stories. She establishes an intertextual relationship with *A Tale of How Stories Are Written*, as she dialogues with Pilniak, paying homage to this author, while at the same time taking the Russian writer's style and story as a challenge, as Ugrešić tells several biographical and fictional stories, all of which she presents from a metafictional narrative that reflects on the literary story, its structure and the meaning of symbolic representations present in the story. In this sense, cunning and betrayal are not perceived by Dubravka Ugrešić as necessarily negative acts, but as means to achieve a higher end: artistic expression and the exploration of the human condition.

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