Spying on the Balkan Spy. Paranoia and Conspiracy in the Works of Dušan Kovačević

Goran Lazičić

Keywords
Yugoslav drama; paranoia; comedy; political satire

The Balkan Spy revisited

Dušan Kovačević (b. 1948) is more than just a prominent playwright in contemporary Serbia; he is also a prominent figure in ex-Yugoslav culture. Used almost daily, many sentences from his plays or film scripts have become a part of everyday language, so much so that speakers often do not even know of their actual origin. Kovačević's theater plays[1] and the films based on his screenplays are among the unforgettable classics of Serbian and Yugoslav cinema.[2] Therefore, it is not at all simple to create a critical distance when speaking of his dramatic *oeuvre*. The widely popular film adaptations of his plays seem to have somehow "sealed" the texts, not just for new stage productions, but also for critical read-

1 Selected plays: *Maratonci trče počasni krug* (*The Marathon Family*, 1972), *Radovan Treći* (*Radovan III*, 1973), *Sabirni centar* (*The Gathering Place*, 1981), *Klaustrofobična komedija* (*Claustrophobic Comedy*, 1987), *Profesionalac* (*The Professional*, 1989), *Urnebesna tragedija* (*Tragedy Burlesque*, 1990), *Kontejner sa pet zvezdica* (*Five-Star Dumpster*, 1999), *Doktor Šuster* (*Doctor Shoemaker*, 2001), *Generalna proba samoubistva* (*Dress Rehearsal for a Suicide*, 2009)

2 Selected film scripts: *Ko to tamo peva* (*Who's Singin' Over There?*, S. Šijan, 1980), *Balkanski špijun* (*Balkan Spy*, B. Nikolić and D. Kovačević, 1984), *Underground* (E. Kusturica, 1995), *Profesionalac* (*The Professional*, D. Kovačević, 2003), *Sveti Georgije ubiva aždahu* (*St. George Kills the Dragon*, S. Dragojević, 2009)

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

ings of those texts. However, when it comes to *Balkanski špijun* (*The Balkan Spy*, 1983), the new staging of the play at the National Theater in Belgrade[3] changed not only the play's plot, but also its entire social context was transferred from the early 1980s to the end of the 2010s. This aided and abetted the rediscovery of the work's semantic flexibility and openness.

Ilija Čvorović, the main protagonist of Kovačević's play, is an everyday Belgrade man residing there in the times of Socialist Yugoslavia. At the beginning of the plot, he is invited by the police to an "informative talk." The new subtenant in Ilija's house, Petar Markov Jakovljević, attracts the police's interest because he recently returned to Yugoslavia from France. The conversation triggers a paranoia in Ilija and he begins to secretly spy on the subtenant, convinced that he is a professional spy from the capitalist "imperialist powers" and is, as such, a part of a wide-ranging conspiracy against socialist Yugoslavia. Gradually, both his wife Danica and his twin brother Đura also succumb to Ilija's paranoia, while their daughter, Sonja, worries about her father's mental health. This tension leads to a conflict between the daughter and the mother. In the play's closing scene, Ilija and Đura interrogate and torture the subtenant in order to obtain a confession from him about his alleged espionage activities. During the interrogation, Ilija suffers a heart attack and this is how the play ends.

Amateur Spy as (Anti-)Detective

Balkanski špijun is a parody of both detective and spy stories, with the main protagonist playing the comical character of a self-conceited, incompetent and incapable detective. Not only does he have an inappropriate, exaggerated self-perception that is far from reality, he also simultaneously has a similar paranoid-augmented perception of the subtenant as a professional spy and as his fierce opponent. The protagonist's paranoid worldview is reflected in the structural and generic levels of the play as it becomes a parody of a detective story over time. The classical work of this genre "should present a problem, and the problem should be solved by an amateur or professional detective through processes of deduction."[4] The spy story, conversely, does not usually contain a puzzle. The detective genre is based on the questions *Who?*, *Why?* and *How?*, whereas the

3 The play premiered on 1 October 2018, directed by Tatjana Mandić Rigonat, who also adapted the text.

4 Symons 1992: 13.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

spy story only concerns the last one—*How?*.[5] In *Balkanski špijun*, Ilija's investigation turns out to not just be an incompetent search for truth and a failed attempt to solve a mystery, but, due to its paranoid roots, it becomes increasingly complicated as his quest progresses. This moves the protagonists away from the solution to the mystery (which actually would be a realization that there is no real mystery at all and that the subtenant is not actually a dangerous spy).

The boundaries between paranoia and the mechanisms found in classical crime fiction are actually much more permeable than is often thought. In his detailed and convincing study of crime fiction, paranoia and the modern society, French sociologist Luc Boltanski argues that a detective character in crime fiction behaves essentially like a paranoid person, with the difference being that detectives are not only considered to be mentally healthy by society, but that they are also usually appointed to conduct their investigations by the state.[6] Both the detective and the paranoid person strive to solve a mystery; both are trying to expose the deeper, (supposedly) *real* reality that lies behind the superficial, visible one and both are doing their best to identify and defeat the hidden causes of evil in their society. In this sense, Boltanski argues that when it comes to the structural level of their investigative quest, the detective, the paranoid and the social scientist are all dedicated to similar studies of their respective social realities.

The genre of the Anglo-American detective story traditionally stands "strongly on the side of law and order,"[7] at least in its classical form. The detective is perceived as society's agent, he is a hero and savior of society, is generally super-intelligent, though often eccentric. He is the one who is allowed to even go above and beyond the law in order to keep society from danger. The prime example of this type is Sherlock Holmes, who is also a role model for the character of the detective as a private person, i.e., one who does not act as a state's official.[8] Probably the best-known character of the other type—i.e., the profes-

5 Ibid.: 15–16.

6 Cf. Boltanski 2013: 46. Crime fiction emerges and develops as a genre simultaneously with the invention and description of the phenomenon of paranoia in 1899, by the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin (1856–1926); see ibid.: 45–46.

7 Symons 1992: 20.

8 Cf. Boltanski 2013: 128. Boltanski generally sets the anglophone tradition of crime fiction apart, in which the detective is almost exclusively a private person, i.e., an amateur detective, in contrast to the French tradition in which the detective is a professional, a member of the police or of official security forces with few exceptions; ibid.: 151–52.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

sional detective as an official of the state—is Georges Simenon's commissioner Maigret. When it comes to the comparison of those two characters, it should also be noted that Maigret is an ordinary official, as well as a very ordinary, down-to-earth person, unlike the aristocratic and intellectual detective (like Sherlock Holmes). The character of Ilija Čvorović encompasses and parodically undermines features of both of the aforementioned types: firstly, he is an amateur detective and, secondly, he is an ordinary, lower-middle-class man, undoubtedly *petit bourgeois* in his education, essentially *proletarian* in both his manners and taste. Both Ilija and his twin brother Đura have some character features that are reminiscent of a comic type of yokel or *agroikos*.[9] Ilija's violent nature, which surfaces at the end of the interrogation scene, corresponds to Commissioner Maigret's "petit bourgeois sadism," as Boltanski formulates it.[10]

Behind *or* Within the Social Reality

Boltanski states that a detective story or a crime novel—unlike the fantasy fiction or picaresque novel—is not possible without a predefined social reality in which the plot is situated.[11] The plot of *Balkanski špijun* takes place in Belgrade, the capital of former Yugoslavia in the early 1980s, which means that the play referred to the actual political situation of the time. The 1980s were a time of deep economic and social crisis in the country. The Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia existed for another decade after Tito's death in 1980. Holm Sundhaussen describes this period as the country's "self-destruction." Economic growth slowed dramatically, the number of registered unemployed increased, large parts of the population were rapidly pushed into poverty, inflation soared and the mismanagement and corruption of the Communist officials destroyed the political elite's credibility. The technological backwardness, the International Monetary Fund's drastic repayment requirements and the Yugoslav economy's lack of liquidity boosted the crisis and social tensions increased.[12] The social and economic crisis had radical ideological and political consequences: ethnic nationalisms (and partly racism) increased and the rapid erosion of Communism, as well as the idea of Yugoslav unity, continued unabated.

9 Cf. Kuzmić 2014: 121–22.

10 Boltanski 2013: 201.

11 Cf. ibid.: 36–40.

12 Cf. Sundhaussen 2007: 379.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Kovačević's play was written in 1982 (and was premiered one year later), at a time when these processes, which would end in the Yugoslav wars, were just beginning. This backdrop of the political "self-destruction" of Serbian (i.e., Yugoslav) society is the context in which the play is set and it decisively framed the context in which Ilija's paranoia emerges.

The "re-coding of the past,"[13] which also took place during the 1980s, had many aspects. A series of taboos were broken, primarily started in fictional literature. These included: the unmasking of the partisan myth, the distancing of itself from Tito's cult of personality and the rehabilitation of various quisling organizations and "war criminals" from the Second World War, etc.[14] The reconstruction of the historical and political background of *Balkanski špijun* must also include the taboo of Goli otok. In the initial years after Tito's death, the breaking of the taboo of silence concerning the prison and work camp on the small Adriatic island Goli otok—which had been installed immediately after Tito's break with Stalin in 1948 with the official aim of "re-educating" the Stalinists—was on the rise in some remarkable works of contemporary Yugoslav literature.[15]

Suspicious Persons, During Communism and Previously

An analysis of *Balkanski špijun* cannot avoid comparing Kovačević's play with two other canonical texts from the Slavonic drama tradition, namely Nikolai Gogol's *Revizor* (*The Government Inspector*, 1835) and *Sumnjivo lice* (*A Suspicious Person*, 1888/1923) by Serbian author Branislav Nušić. The character of the subtenant in *Balkanski špijun*, Jakovljević, along with the characters of Khlestakov (by Gogol) and Đoka (by Nušić), belong to the comical tradition of a *suspicious person*, a stranger that suddenly appears in a closed community, bringing turmoil and causing trouble. The alleged identity of all three characters

13 Ibid.: 380.

14 Cf. ibid.: 379.

15 Following the argumentation of contemporary Yugoslav literary critic Predrag Matvejević, Nicole Münnich analyzes the novels by Branko Hofman *Noč do jutra* (*Night till Morning*, 1981), Antonije Isaković's *Tren 2* (*The Moment 2*, 1982) and Slobodan Selenić's *Pismo/glava* (*Heads or Tails*, 1982) as the seminal texts of the so-called Goli otok literature. She also adds Dušan Jovanović's theater play *Karamazovi* (*The Karamazovs*, 1981) and Vitomil Zupan's novel *Levitan* (*Levitan*, 1982) to the "broader core" of this canon; see Münnich 2006: 209–10.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

is not of their own construction, but the identity that has been imposed on them from the outside by others, or more precisely, by the *paranoid* others.[16] Like *Balkanski špijun*, the plays by Gogol and Nušić are also examples of a hybrid drama genre that encompasses both a comedy of manners and political satire, meaning that the characters are primarily representatives of the state apparatus, and only secondarily are they private persons and family members.

The outline of the plot in Gogol's play is as follows: After receiving a confidential announcement that the state government's inspector will soon arrive to their town, the town's mayor and clerks, in a paranoid hysteria, start to believe that the unknown young man from St. Petersburg—actually an adventurer who accidentally happened to arrive in this town—is none other than the inspector, who—for the sake of his investigation—arrives incognito. Nušić modified this plot primarily with respect to the fact that the assumed identity of the suspicious person is not actually a representative of the state, but its enemy. The comical confusion outlined by Nušić lies in the fact that the alleged political criminal and dangerous anarchist is actually the secret fiancé of the mayor's daughter, who also arrived in town incognito.[17]

According to the Russian playwright, the falsely identified stranger stands for the public order established and maintained by the state, while the alleged spy represents the enemy of the state and a threat to the public and national order according to his Serbian successors. In other words, Gogol's work is the jumping off point where the object of the paranoia is a part of the state; according to Nušić and Kovačević this individual is the enemy of the state. At the same time, while Ilija Čvorović is portrayed as morally faultless, his character is ethically completely transparent, thus resembling the classical tragic hero. The characters as outlined in Gogol's and Nušić's plays, on the other hand, are morally corrupt and hypocritical, which makes them typical comical characters.[18] Although

16 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 168.

17 *Sumnjivo lice* was written by Nušić in 1888 but didn't have its premier until 1923. In 1928, the author wrote a preface stating that the subtitle of the first draft version of the play was "A gogoliad in two acts," which was later changed in the final one to "A comedy in two acts." – cf. Nušić 1957: 161–62.

18 The parodied figure of a spy also appears as an episode character in Nušić's *Sumnjivo lice*. Aleksa Žunjić has a business card that openly states that he is a "county spy." He did this for strategic reasons, as explained by the captain's assistant: "He [the spy] says, when he was hiding himself, he couldn't find out anything, and now everybody is telling him details directed against each other." ("Он каже, пре док је крио није могао ништа да дозна, а сад му сви казују један против другог." – Nušić 1957:

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Gogol's Khlestakov is not a deliberate trickster or even self-consciously manipulative, he also cannot be considered to be a positive character either.[19] Nevertheless, according to Kovačević, all characters in *Balkanski špijun* are *per se* actually positive, morally impeccable and faultless. In this respect, all members of society in *Balkanski špijun* are allegorically represented as victims of the system which is itself corrupt, full of inherent aberrations and structural injustices.

In the works of both Gogol and Nušić, the rivalry between the mother and the daughter is no more than a conventional comical motif. In the work by Kovačević, however, the conflict between Sonja and Danica represents a deep generational and ideological fracture in the family as well as a metaphorical fracture in society. In this respect, Nikola Janković argues that Ilija's paranoia could itself be understood as a consequence of this generational gap, i.e., the conflict between the generation that created the Socialist state and the subsequent one that would later decisively contribute to its dissolution.[20]

The other important difference between the plays by Gogol and Nušić and the one by Kovačević, is that in *Balkanski špijun* there is no peripety in the plot, there is no sudden discovery about the true identity of the main character (Gogol and Nušić include an intercepted letter to achieve this effect). Until the last seconds of the play Ilija Čvorović believes that the subtenant is a professional spy.

According to Kovačević, the subtenant is nevertheless the figure of reason in the play (a typical figure in a classicist comedy), while Gogol deliberately constructed his main character in a domain beyond that tradition. One could argue that the only element that stays inviolable, honest and decent in Gogol's work is actually the state itself.[21] However, the local civil officials are also representatives of the state, which is thereby also being portrayed and satirized by Gogol as corrupt and immoral; they are actually being represented as malfunctional parts of the state that should be removed by the real government inspector as the true representative of the state. The inspector's message for the mayor occurs in the play's last lines. Khlestakov is just a projection surface, a "phantom,"[22] his intercepted letter to his friend in St. Petersburg is *literally* a sort of moral mirror for all of the town's inhabitants. In the last scene of Kovačević's play, however, the

193–94. All English translations of the original quotations in the text are mine, G.L.) The parody is even more striking, considering that it is actually the spy Žunjić who brings the—false—information about the arrival of the alleged terrorist.

19 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 167.

20 Cf. Janković 2011: 69.

21 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 177.

22 Ibid.: 185.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

shifting of the dialogue towards Ilija's monologue automatically pushes the subtenant's position into the role of the rational(izing) mirror, a mirror through which Ilija's paranoia is reflected.

Paranoia and Conspiracy, in Communism and Beyond

Conspiracy theories—the "belief that powerful, hidden, evil forces control human destinies," as Michael Barkun concisely defines the phenomenon[23]—are usually significant subcultural phenomena in a social sense, the emergence of which are connected with existential anxieties and shocking and traumatic events. However, conspiracy theories are becoming more than just a subcultural form of escapism or paranoia observed in some socio-historical contexts or some political and ideological systems; rather, they are often becoming a powerful discursive instrument of political populism.

The literal and clinical use of the term *paranoia* notwithstanding, there is also its metaphorical meaning. In his essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964), Richard Hofstadter uses the notion in this symbolic meaning in order to analyze the right-wing extremism in the United States after the Second World War (most notably McCarthyism). Hofstadter distinguishes, on the one hand, the clinical paranoiac as a person who believes to be a target of a personal conspiracy, one that is "directed specifically *against him*," and the political paranoiac, on the other hand, as the person for whom the conspiracy threatens the whole society. It is in other words, "directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life."[24]

Another symbolical use of the notion of paranoia can be found in some seminal theoretical works on postmodernism.[25] In this theoretical context, paranoia is usually regarded as a symptom of a counter-Enlightenment, anti-rationalist postmodern worldview. In postmodern fiction, which in this case correlates almost exclusively to the late capitalist societies of the West, paranoia first stands for a

23 Barkun 2006: 2.

24 Hofstadter 2008: 4. In his essay, Hofstadter draws a line tracing the diachronic succession in American conspiracism from anti-Catholicism, anti-Masonry and on to anti-Communism.

25 See Hutcheon 2000 and Lucy 1997. Some other influential critics, however, consider the phenomenon of paranoia to be a part of the "epistemological" paradigm of high modernism, the phenomenon thereby laying beyond the "ontological" interest of postmodernism; cf. McHale 1996: 23–24.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

hyperactive individual imagination and it is a kind of substitute for the stable explanation of the world that has been lost. As Patell puts it, "the only way to be 'inside, safe' and thus simulate the benefits of community is to pick your own metaphor and your own paranoia."[26] In this way the common perspective is reversed; conspiracy theories are not perceived as a result of paranoia, but paranoia gradually becomes a means of defense, even a strategy for a cynical counter-attack against conspiracy theories that are imposed and instrumentalized by the power structures and systems of total control.[27]

The epistemological structure of paranoia is spiral. It usually begins with an ordinary everyday fact or action, but it turns out to be a trigger, prompting the paranoid person irreversibly into the spiral of paranoia. From that moment on, everything that the person experiences automatically becomes part of the paranoid construction, everything becomes connected to everything, everything seems to be part of a certain conspiracy, or as Niall Lucy formulates it:

> A feature of paranoia is its potential to become a totalizing discourse, a discourse with no 'outside.' For the paranoid, everything can count as evidence of a particular theory of the truth, a theory that is otherwise (from outside the space of paranoia, to which the paranoid is blind) understood to be grounded on a false assumption and so the 'truth' it sees is only a delusion based on a miscalculation or a misreading. But the theory itself, as a set of rules and procedures, is not necessarily wrong.[28]

This collision of the paranoid perception of the outer world with an objective reality—or at least with the one considered by the society/theater audience to be objective and true—makes a sharp counterpoint that Kovačević often uses in the play as a source of humor.

According to Barkun, the core principles of every conspiracy theory are the following:

1. Nothing happens by accident.
2. Nothing is as it seems.
3. Everything is connected.[29]

26 Patell 2001: 150.

27 Cf. Lucy 1997: 229–30 and Hutcheon 2000: 120.

28 Ibid.: 13.

29 Cf. Barkun 2006: 3–4.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Conspiracy theories are purely Manichaean in their structure and strictly dualistic in their worldview. When it comes to their scope, Barkun distinguishes three types of conspiracies:

1. Event conspiracies
2. Systemic conspiracies
3. Superconspiracies[30]

Hofstadter's definition of the paranoid political worldview actually comprises the second and the third of Barkun's types postulating namely that

> … the distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. History *is* a conspiracy set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade.[31]

In *Balkanski špijun*, the starting point of Ilija's paranoia is his retort to Danica given at the very outset of the play: "When did the police ever care about a normal and decent person?!"[32] After the briefing in the police station, he is absolutely convinced that the subtenant has worked against Yugoslavia abroad. The spiral of paranoia starts to progress and quickly absorbs Ilija's entire psychical reality. His *credo* become two sentences that actually paraphrase Barkun's description of paranoia: "Everything is the opposite of what it seems to be"[33] and "The spies are among us, all you need to know is how to recognize them."[34] He soon develops a fixed version of a vast conspiracy around the subtenant's activity, reaching the proportions of Barkun's systemic type of conspiracy: "He was sent from abroad to organize enemy units. He brought money to buy and bribe people."[35] Towards the end of the interrogation scene, Ilija offers the subtenant a

30 Ibid.: 6.

31 See Hofstadter 2008: 29.

32 „Када се милиција интересовала за обичног и поштеног човека!" – Kovačević 2002: 76.

33 „Све је супроптно од онога што изгледа да јесте." – ibid.: 110.

34 „Шпијуни су међу нама, само их треба знати – препознати." – ibid.: 112.

35 „Он је послат из иностранства да организује непријатељске групе. Донô је паре да купује и подмићује људе." – ibid.: 89. Danica is wondering who sponsors all of this, to which Đura replies: "The one they work for is paying. CIA, my sister, CIA.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

chance (as a kind of compromise, as seen from his perspective) to surrender to the authorities, and then to start to work for the Yugoslav secret police as a repenting double-spy. The culmination of Kovačević's parody of political paranoia is the point at which Ilija's conspiracy theory practically matches Hofstadter's definition and becomes a version of a *superconspiracy*. After he discovers two badges of the Polish civil movement "Solidarity" among the subtenant's personal belongings, Ilija tells him:

"And do you know, sir, who organized those young people on the Square of Marx and Engels to carry a banner with this sign? Huh? You don't know that was the idea of your Professor friend… And do you know who brought the foreigner Pope, after six hundred years, to the Vatican throne? Huh? Not only a stranger, but a Pole? Huh?"[36]

As mentioned previously, the paranoia and conspiracy narratives in *Balkanski špijun* are induced in the specific, highly contradictory social and ideological context of Yugoslav Socialism. The main features of this political system, in the way in which they are represented in Kovačević's play, show some striking similarities with the basic thesis of Milovan Đilas' book *The New Class*.[37] One could argue that Ilija's paranoia is, in fact, the logical and unavoidable consequence of the Communist "tyranny over the mind," as Đilas calls it.[38]

Once Communism consolidated its power, it established Marxism and founded its so-called dialectical materialism as the dogma and the universal intellectual method of a society. As a result, the system "pushes its adherents into the

They've destroyed a half of the world!" („Плаћа онај за кога раде. ЦИА, снајка, ЦИА. Уништили су пола света!" – ibid.: 113)

36 „А да ли ти је познато, господине, ко је организовô оне омладинце, на Тргу Маркса и Енгелса, да носе транспарент са овим знаком? А? Није ти познато да је то смислио твој пријатељ професор... А да ли ти је познато ко је довео Папустранца, после шесто година, на престо Ватикана? А? Ем странац, ем Пољак? А?" – ibid.: 136.

37 Milovan Đilas (1911–1995) was a Yugoslav revolutionary, a highly ranked Communist official at the time, but by the end of his life he was viewed as a dissident. *The New Class* was written in 1955 and 1956; it was first published in English in the USA in 1957. Đilas was sentenced to seven years in prison in Yugoslavia for publishing the work. The first legal edition of the book in Yugoslavia was published in Belgrade in 1990.

38 Cf. Djilas 1962: 124–46.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

position which makes it impossible for them to hold any other viewpoint."[39] Moreover, as with any other totalitarian ideology which tries to represent itself as the only true and universal explanation of the world, Communism became "increasingly one-sided and exclusive" over time and "created half-truths and tried to justify them."[40] This makes Communist society a very fertile soil for various conspiracy theories: anyone can turn out to be an enemy, and the enemy could be everywhere and attack at any time. Instead of the presumption of innocence, the presumption of guilt becomes ubiquitous:

> A citizen in the Communist system lives oppressed by the constant pangs of his conscience, and the fear that he has transgressed. He is always fearful that he will have to demonstrate that he is not an enemy of socialism, just as in the Middle Ages a man constantly had to show his devotion to the Church.[41]

For Gogol, conversely, the social context and preconditions for the *paranoid inclination* of the town's inhabitants are not only historically contingent and more specific but are also a result of their personal shortcomings and moral transgressions (simply the offender's fear of being caught). The comical plot of *Revizor*, based on the mistaken identity (*qui pro quo*) of the alleged inspector, was, however, not just one unique anecdote from the Russian province of the time. Unexpected, unannounced state inspections to provincial towns were not actually unusual and were a consequence of the efforts by Emperor Nicholas I (1825–1855) to sharpen the control of the administrative system in the provinces. Moreover, the inspectors were sometimes disguised as strangers or travelling *incognito* through the provinces in order to investigate the situation in the communities more efficiently and objectively. This was the precondition for the emergence of a type of constant, latent paranoia among the civil servants in the provinces of being constantly under secret surveillance. Over time this could make the townspeople suspicious of contact with any stranger.[42]

39 Ibid.: 124.

40 Ibid.: 129.

41 Ibid.: 132.

42 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 165–66. However, an indication of a broader paranoid vision of the events can also be found in Gogol's play. At the very outset of the plot, the local judge Ammos Fiodorovich Liapkin-Tiapkin warns the mayor that the situation with the inspector is probably part of a large-scale secret political strategy by the government: "In my opinion, Anton Antonovich, the situation is complex and rather political. It means that Russia… yes… intends to start a war, and the Government has secretly

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

The *paranoid predisposition* of Ilija Čvorović seems to be a consequence of the very essence of the political system in which he is living. The worldview and the way of thinking of the ordinary citizens under Communism, as well as of intellectuals, always has "two faces—one for themselves, their own; the other for the public, the official."[43] The collective, but also individual, schizophrenia seems to be an inevitable consequence of the ideological dogmatism and totalitarian control.[44]

According to the official ideological worldview, which corresponds—at least publicly—with Ilija's personal point of view, the subtenant is not only a suspicious *stranger*, but moreover, due to his family origin, he belongs to a defamed, perilous social class from the time prior to the Second World War, namely the *bourgeoisie* from the Yugoslav Monarchy. As Đilas emphasizes:

> Communists settle accounts with their opponents not because they have committed crimes, but because they are opponents. … From the Communist point of view, these opponents are punished by 'due process of law,' although there may be no legal basis for their being convicted.[45]

This is the essence of Ilija's paranoia: firstly, it is perceived as "normal" to preventively act against potential or real opponents; secondly, this action is perceived not only as morally unproblematic and justified, but also as completely legal and ideologically advisable. The typical mechanism of political processes in Communism, as described by Đilas, includes organized provocateurs and the fake, illegal organizations led by the secret police as a trap for possible dissidents and opponents of the system. This mechanism can be clearly recognized in the way in which Ilija—locked within his paranoid conspiracy narrative—sees his situation with the subtenant and in how he conducts his investigation.

One could argue that, if the subtenant is chiefly the rational(izing) mirror from which Ilija's paranoia is reflected, then Ilija's character itself is, to some extent, primarily the projection field for Communist ideology, the body and the mind upon which the ideology is being imprinted and operating through.

---

commissioned an inspector to find out if there is any treason anywhere." («Я думаю, Антон Антонович, что здесь тонкая и больше политическая причина. Это значит вот что: Россия... да... хочет вести войну, и министерия-то, вот видите, и подослала чиновника, чтобы узнать, нет ли где измены». – Gogol 1985: 11)

43 Djilas 1962: 132.

44 See also Deutschmann 2006.

45 Cf. Djilas 1962: 90–91.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Between Comedy and Tragedy

Balkanski špijun is a dark comedy or absurdist tragicomedy for the great majority of critics.[46] This is yet another link that connects Kovačević with Gogol, whose *Revizor* is often interpreted as an essentially modern example of drama in which the tragical potential of the play is being induced *out of* and *through* the comedy.[47] According to Zoran Milutinović, *Balkanski špijun* ought to be labeled as a tragicomedy, unlike *Sumnjivo lice* by Branislav Nušić which is a true comedy.[48] As Milutinović emphasizes, the tragicomedy in twentieth century drama differs from earlier examples of the genre; the main feature of the newer form lies in the fact that "the tragical content is being represented using the traditional means of comedy, but thereby, however, not losing its tragical quality."[49] Nušić's character of the town mayor, Jerotije Pantić, is based on a drastic, comical portrayal of someone who is disproportionately and unrealistically ambitious. However, this ridiculous character is not actually dangerous for those around him.[50] Ilija Čvorović, on the contrary, is a "man of ideology," his ideological blindness is comical in the first place, but it turns out to be very dangerous in the end, not only for him personally and for his family, but also for the entire society.[51] After the premiere of the play in 1983, theater critic Jovan Ćirilov emphasized the metaphysical aspect of Ilija's paranoia comparing Kovačević to Kafka: If *Der Process* (*The Trial*) is "a tragedy of one causelessly persecuted," then *Balkanski špijun* is "a comedy of a persecutor without a cause," wrote the critic.[52] At the archetypal level, Ilija's character is an example of a shunned individual or former delinquent who seeks to redeem himself by accomplishing an extraordinary endeavor, and in so doing might regain his status within the community that expelled him.[53]

In the list of *dramatis personae*, Ilija is ironically described as "the owner of the house, the garden, his wife, and the idea of a free man and a free country."[54]

46 Cf. Simović 2002: VII; Jakšić Provči 2012: 51–52; Pantić 2013: 233.

47 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 52–53.

48 Cf. Milutinović 2010: 95–96.

49 Ibid.: 99.

50 Ibid.: 97.

51 Cf. ibid.: 99–105.

52 As cited in Jakšić Provči 2012: 72.

53 Cf. Kuzmić 2014: 85.

54 „Газда куће, окућнице, жене и идеје о слободном човеку и слободној земљи" – Kovačević 2002: 72.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

The fact that Ilija is called "the owner of his wife" is only partly related to the patriarchal order that prevails within the family: Ilija is the owner of Danica because she is trapped in the spiral of his paranoia. The statement that he is "the owner of the idea of a free man and a free country" turns out to be an ironic juxtaposition: Ilija is being governed by an ideology that is only nominally based on freedom. In fact, he is a marionette, an object—in the Foucauldian sense—of the ideology.

The character of an ideological paranoiac could be paradigmatically compared with a classical tragic hero. The predestined, unchangeable fate of the tragic hero, upon which he cannot have any influence no matter what decision he makes or what action he undertakes, and which inevitably leads him to catastrophe and death, appears at the structural level to be identical with the obsession of a paranoid with a particular idea or ideology and his inability to escape the spiral of paranoia in which he is encapsulated. One could, therefore, argue that Ilija Čvorović, when it comes to the inherent structure of his character, represents a tragic hero placed in the structural context and poetical mechanisms of comedy. In this respect, Petar Marjanović's thesis is very intriguing as he points out that even if every trace of Ilija's Stalinist complex would be removed from the play, the plot would still function in the same way.[55]

In the closing interrogation scene, Kovačević's tragicomical character ends up in a kind of self-analysis and he tries to deal with the principal reasons for his own paranoia. The subtenant gives him the friendly advice that he should immediately undergo psychiatric treatment. Ilija begins this by trying to defend and justify himself, more or less directly speaking about the psychological, but at the same time the socio-historical and ideological causes which made him suitable to fall into such paranoia. These include his deep, innate hatred and frustration with the fact of being born in the inferior, exploited social class, his resentment of the fact that he had become, without being asked to, the cannon fodder of the vast totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century.

The *Other* New Class

"It has been said in jest that the Communist leaders created a Communist society—for themselves. In fact, they do identify themselves with society and its aspi-

55 As cited in Kuzmić 2014: 85–86. The thesis, which indirectly proved to be correct, was carried out by T. Mandić Rigonat in the aforementioned adaptation of the play in 2018.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

rations. Absolute despotism equates itself with the belief in absolute human happiness, though it is an all-inclusive and universal tyranny." This is how Đilas describes the position of the *new class* in Communist countries.[56] He uses this notion with respect to the political bureaucracy of the Communist party, which transforms into the ruling oligarchy in those allegedly classless countries. The power itself becomes the aim for the Communist political leaders, instead of being the means through which to develop a classless society. Đilas rejects the critical definition of real socialism as a "total state capitalism," arguing that it is not the state who owns and runs the public property, but it is the new class. In that sense, he sees the reality of communism at that point (the end of the 1950s) as a peculiar hybrid form that absorbs various "feudal, capitalist, and even slave-owning" elements.[57]

In addition to Đilas's analysis, Kovačević's play reveals the deep ideological contradictions that reside in the foundations of socialist Yugoslavia, e.g., the sharp ideological divisions that were only temporarily vanquished by the Communists on the surface of the society. These controversial events include the liberation of the country in 1945 and Tito's break with Stalin in 1948, with the subsequent persecutions of Stalin's followers. The most notable labor camp of this time, which later took on great symbolical meaning within the anti-communist narratives, was Goli otok, as mentioned previously. Nicole Münnich notes, for example, that after Tito's death, at the beginning of 1980s, the taboo of Goli otok was primarily and decisively broken in literature. This phenomenon was initially part of liberalizing tendencies, but by the end of the decade, in the wake of emerging nationalism, the topic lost its subversive role.[58]

After the Second World War Ilija was—like his brother Đura—a keen and enthusiastic Stalinist, which was in accordance with the newly established official state ideology at that time. However, since they did not change their political beliefs and inclinations after Yugoslav official state policy underwent a radical turnaround in 1948, they ended up spending a couple of years in prison. Ilija tells the subtenant the following about his relation to Stalinism:

56 Djilas 1962: 131.

57 Ibid.: 172.

58 The narrative of Goli otok was hardly suitable for national(istic) attribution, unlike, for example, Jasenovac, a concentration camp for Serbs, Jews and Roma led by the Ustashe in the fascist Independent State of Croatia, or Bleiburg, where members of the Ustashe movement were massacred shortly after the end of the Second World War; see Münnich 2006: 217–18.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

"You know for sure, your people told you when you moved in with me, that I had served two years in prison. You know that. I don't know if they told you about Đura, probably they did, he was also there for over three years... . Yes, I loved him the way someone loves God, or, say, children, mother... Stalin was everything for me. He is credited with all sorts of things today: some things are true and some things are not. He is being charged with crimes he did not commit. Some of that he did. That is well-known and I admit it. However, then, at that time, I thought he was sinless. I was young, stupid, angry, I would take a gun and go fighting. I would die thinking I was dying for a great, universal justice. I needed sobriety, and that was a good one, to stop, think a bit, and tell myself: who imprisoned you, wished you well, not to haste and to suffer. And today I am grateful to them."[59]

After spending years in prison, Ilija is terrified of any state institution and scared to death of just the idea of having anything to do with state authorities. This constant fear is the actual birthplace of his paranoia. Therefore, he impulsively, from pure survival instinct—one could argue even consciously and strategically—unquestioningly appropriates the official ideological point of view and he unconditionally subjugates himself to the ruling political discourse. "Ground in the wheels of ideology, 're-educated' and tamed into a subject,"[60] Ilija finally, so one could ironically remark, became a good and exemplary citizen in the Communist system.

The key question of Kovačević's political satire is the following: How could it happen that an apparently normal person starts to behave like Ilija Čvorović? In which ideological system is that possible? Ilija and his brother are represented as both perpetrators and victims of that ideological system. However, the question of whether the system has created Ilija Čvorović or Ilija Čvorović, being an

59 „Вама је сигурно познато, то су вам ваши рекли, када сте се усељавали код мене, да сам одлежô две године затвора. То знате. Не знам да ли су помињали и Ђуру, вероватно јесу, и он је био преко три године... . Јесте, волео сам га кô што неко воли Бога, или, рецимо, децу, мајку... Стаљин је за мене био све и свја. Њему данас приписују свашта: и што је истина и што није. Оптужују га за злочине које није починио. Нешто јесте. То се зна и ја то признајем. Међутим, онда, у оно време, мислио сам да је безгрешан. Био сам млад, глуп, љут, узô би' пушку и борио би' се. Погинô би', мислећи да гинем за велику, светску правду. Требало ми је отрежњење, и то добро отрежњење, да станем, размислим, и да себи кажем: ко те је затворио желео ти је добро, да не срљаш и не страдаш. И данас сам им захвалан." – Kovačević 2002: 138.

60 Pantić 2013: 227.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

avid Communist and Stalinist, helped to create the system remains open. In other words, to what extent does Ilija bear responsibility for the emergence of such a system to which he himself falls victim in the end? Towards the end of the interrogation scene he admits to the subtenant: "My whole life I have been on the verge of killing someone, armed with many rights, including nobody having the right to blame me. Don't make me let you pay for all those who have insulted, humiliated and trampled on me."[61]

In his intriguing allegorical interpretation, Nikola Janković sees Stalinism (Ilija) and Liberalism (the subtenant) as the play's two dominant ideologies. Pushed to the periphery or even outright demonized and persecuted during Titoism, these ideologies started to show up again on society's surface with the economic crisis and the changes underway after Tito's death. In this respect, at the time of its premiere at the beginning of the 1980s, *Balkanski špijun* "confronted the then-actual ideology of liberalism with the seemingly anachronistic ideology of Stalinism."[62] According to Janković's interpretation, Ilija is a former, subjugated enemy of the system, and the subtenant is the current, approaching one (though in a broader historical respect he would actually be an old, originally defeated enemy). Just as Ilija got a "second chance" after being "re-educated" on Goli otok, now, in the course of his own "re-educating" of the subtenant, he offers him a "second chance."[63]

The tragic feature of Ilija's character lies in the fact that those who oppressed and exploited him (before the Second World War) and who sent him to jail (after the war) even though he was innocent—at least in a structural sense—did not disappear when one political and social system (monarchy, capitalism) was replaced by another (Stalinism, followed by Yugoslav socialism). Deceived and manipulated by the ideological fog of the new system, Ilija is unable to comprehend that his oppressors actually belong not only to the ruling class, but also to the old capitalist system. In his concluding monologue, Ilija fathoms—albeit unconsciously—the imminent contradictions of Yugoslav Socialism, primarily the opportunism of the Yugoslav political elite. In the social reality of the country, the emancipation narrative of the working-class gradually became an empty slogan, and the workers' self-management project turned out to be practically dys-

61 „Ја сам цео живот био на ивици да неког убијем, са пуно права, чак да ми нико не замери. Немојте ви да ми платите за све који су ме вређали, понижавали и газили." – Kovačević 2002: 140.

62 Janković 2011: 56.

63 Cf. ibid.: 68.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

functional and a sort of rhetorical mask used by the ruling *new class* to retain its own positions and privileges. As Đilas points out:

> Despite oppression, despotism, unconcealed confiscations, and privileges of the ruling echelons, some of the people – and especially the Communists – retain the illusions contained in their slogans. Although the Communist revolution may start with the most idealistic concepts, calling for wonderful heroism and gigantic effort, it sows the greatest and the most permanent illusions.[64]

One could argue that Ilija's character stands for a convinced, idealistic Communist, while the Yugoslav Communist elite gave up its declared ideological principles. His ardent belief in the ideal of a Communist society—contrasted against the pragmatism and opportunism of the social setting in which he is living—is the crucial feature of both the comic and tragic sides of his character.

Conclusion: Towards the Political, in the 1980s and Beyond

The comical subversion of Communist ideology, as well as the sociopolitical satire of the practical failures of Yugoslav Socialism are the main topics in several other plays by Dušan Kovačević, particularly in those written during the turbulent period starting from the end of the 1980s until the mid-1990s, such as *Klaustrofobična komedija* (*Claustrophobic Comedy*, 1987), *Profesionalac* (*The Professional*, 1989), *Urnebesna tragedija* (*The Tragic Burlesque*, 1990) and *Lari Tompson, tragedija jedne mladosti* (*Larry Thompson, the Tragedy of a Youth*, 1996). Zoran Milutinović labels these four plays as Kovačević's series of "sociopolitical and satirical plays" and points out that a concrete political topic, as well as specific and local political context lie in the very core of each of those works.[65]

The alleged spy conspiracy in *Balkanski špijun* is the result of Ilija's ideologically induced paranoia, and with the aim of opposing and stopping it, he actually starts to behave and to act as a professional detective. In the background of the plot, Kovačević is satirically targeting the corruption and malfunctioning bureaucracy; his targets are the double moral standards of the country's political elites, but also the social impact of the severe economic crisis in the early 1980s in Yugoslavia. This is the reason why some other critics, unlike Zoran Milutino-

64 Djilas 1962: 30.

65 Cf. Milutinović 2010: 7.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

vić, argued that, for instance, *Balkanski špijun* and *Profesionalac* are the two paradigmatic plays for Kovačević's political and satirical works.[66]

To label *Balkanski špijun* as a political satire might not in itself be incorrect, but the crucial question is then: What is the exact target of the author's satirical intention? If it is a general critical subversion of Yugoslav Socialism, as an ideological and sociopolitical system, then one must conclude that Kovačević's satire, at the time of its publication in the early 1980s, was rather indistinct and simplifying. This satirical image of Communism, allegorically derived from Ilija's fictional biography, would correspond to a historical moment in the years following Tito's break with Stalin. In this sense, *Balkanski špijun* is pendant of *The New Class*: Kovačević's picture of communism is fundamentally in line with the analysis given by Đilas, or more precisely, it could be seen as its artistic transposition. The play, however, centers on the opposite pole of the social system, on the *other new class*, not on the one of the exploiters in communism (*red bourgeoisie*), but on the one of the exploited (*red petite bourgeoisie*). Within the analysis of Milovan Đilas, the historical praxis of communism—as of the mid-1950s—is principally seen as a development "from a revolutionary dictatorship to a reactionary despotism."[67] One could argue that Kovačević, writing his play at the beginning of the 1980s, generally *essentializes* communism as an ideological and socio-historical system, without making any practical or crucial difference between Stalinism and Titoism. This is in fact similar to Đilas' perspective, who also—although he details some differences between Yugoslavia and the other countries of the Eastern Bloc—ultimately generalizes his *diagnosis* for all socialist and communist systems of the time. These views are perceived of—to summarize—as examples of basically one system that has an inherent structural failure that cannot be fixed and which inevitably led to its paradoxes, misfortunes and, ultimately, to its crimes.

But if Đilas's critique corresponded with the actual moment of its publication and offered an accurate and lucid diagnosis of contemporary communism, Kovačević's critique of Yugoslav socialism would prove to be anachronistic and bypasses the complexity of this system, as if nothing had happened and changed in the social and ideological respect in Yugoslavia between the late 1940s and early 1980s. This is already evident in the reception of the two works, or rather in the status of their authors: Đilas's book was banned and he ended up in prison for seven years, while Kovačević's play was premiered in one of the most renowned Belgrade theaters, and shortly afterwards, its film adaptation was widely popular

66 Cf. Pantić 2013: 226–27.

67 Djilas 1962: 90–91.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

and won several awards at prestigious Yugoslav festivals. One could argue that some clichés and schematization of the characters were necessary to create the comic effects, but on the other hand, they set some limits and simplifications when it came to the representation, or better to say, to the narrative deconstruction of the contemporary political and social system in the play, as well as in the movie.

In this respect, the play is much more relevant and significant as a socio-psychological drama study of a character than it is as a socio-political satire. Such an interpretation would (incidentally) also be in line with the author's openly declared intention. In an interview given in 2003, Kovačević specifically stated that his goal in the play was not to make "a political poster, but to analyze paranoia and the mentality of the people who, out of fear, become police collaborators."[68] The character of Ilija Čvorović is typical, or even symptomatic, for one social milieu and for one ideological totalitarianism (Stalinism), but is based on his fictional life trajectory, whereas the social system of Yugoslav socialism cannot be appropriately satirically dissected. The lack of deeper characterization and the dramaturgical neglect of Sonja and the subtenant further substantiate such argumentation. As mentioned previously, the main function of those persons in the play is to comically contrast Ilija's character. However, a more complete and complex satirical allegory would have to also actively include the fictional representatives of such social positions.

The later historical development, which brought about the breakup of socialist Yugoslavia and the nationalist-inspired wars, opens up new interpretive perspectives into *Balkanski špijun*. Situating the play within the canon of the so-called *Goli otok*-literature is also not unproblematic; if this view is adopted, then it could find its place only in the broader corpus of that canon, as Nicole Münnich defines it. This is simply because there is no detailed treatment of that historical complex in the play, it is not even directly named in the text. One possible interpretation could be—in fact at the metadramatic level—to read the biography of Ilija Čvorović as an allegory of the very emergence of *Goli otok*-literature itself in the early 1980s. The structure is clear: suppressed trauma, external circumstances allow it at some point to ascend to the surface, which is then followed by the search for its own articulation, i.e., for the appropriate narrative or literary form (the conspiracy theory in the play). Such an allegorical reading from the current perspective, following the collapse of Socialism and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, must also encompass the later, post-communist legacy of anti-communism: the fact that the narratives about the victims of communism

68 Cit. after Janković 2011: 41.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

were instrumentalized in inciting ethnic hatred and in justifying new, nationalist-inspired crimes and genocide.

As an anti-communist satire, *Balkanski špijun* has lost its political subversiveness today. This can be seen most clearly in the aforementioned current setting of the play in the National Theater in Belgrade, in which the causes of Ilija's paranoia no longer have anything to do with either Stalinism or with Titoism but lie in the post-Yugoslav transitional *totalitarianism of social hopelessness*. As a tragicomical character study, the indisputable artistic mastery and actuality of *Balkanski špijun* can be found in the conveying of one historically specific psycho-pathology—in a somewhat Kafkaesque manner—not only at the universally existential, but also at the archetypal and metaphysical levels.

Bibliography

Barkun, Michael (2006): *A Culture of Conspiracy. Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA.

Boltanski, Luc (2013): *Rätsel und Komplotte: Kriminalliteratur, Paranoia, moderne Gesellschaft*. Trans. by Christine Pries. Berlin.

Deutschmann, Peter (2006): "Sozialismus und Schizophrenie," in *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 58, 141–202.

Djilas, Milovan (1962 [1957]): *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*. New York.

Gogol', Nikolaj Vasil'evič (1985): *Dramaticheskie proizvedeniia*. Moscow.

Hofstadter, Richard (2008 [1965]): *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York.

Hutcheon, Linda (2000 [1988]): *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York.

Jakšić Provči, Branka (2012): *Paralele i susretanja: Dušan Kovačević i Aleksandar Popović*. Novi Sad.

Janković, Nikola (2011): *Balkanski špijun i njegovi nastavci: Polifonija i ideologija u adaptacijama Dušana Kovačevića*. Belgrade.

Kovačević, Dušan (2002): *Drame*. Belgrade.

Kuzmić, Aleksandra (2014): *Slika sveta u dramama Dušana Kovačevića: Gola istina i čas istorije*. Belgrade.

Lucy, Niall (1997): *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford.

McHale, Brian (1996 [1987]). *Postmodernist Fiction*. London.

Milutinović, Zoran (2010): "Predgovor" and "Pogovor," in Kovačević, Dušan: *Balkanski špijun*. Belgrade, 7–15 and 95–105.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Münnich, Nicole (2006): "Jugoslavische literarische Geschichtskonzeption als Katalysator im gesellschaftlichen Umbruchsprozess. Die Goli Otok-Literatur nach dem Tode Titos," in Richter, Angela/Beyer, Barbara (eds.): *Geschichte (ge-)brauchen: Literatur und Geschichtskultur im Staatssozialismus: Jugoslavien und Bulgarien*. Berlin, 205–20.

Nušić, Branislav (1957): *Odabrane komedije*. Novi Sad, Belgrade.

Pantić, Mihajlo (2013): "Dušan Kovačević, dramski pisac," in Kovačević, Dušan: *Sabrana dela. Drame 5*. Belgrade, 217–34.

Patell, Cyrus R. K. (2001): *Negative Liberties*. Durham.

Simović, Ljubomir (2002): "Tragedije kao komedije," in Kovačević, Dušan: *Drame*. Belgrade, VII–XIX.

Sundhaussen, Holm (2007): *Geschichte Serbiens: 19.–21. Jahrhundert*. Wien.

Symons, Julian (1992): *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel. A History*. London.

Zelinsky, Bodo (2012): "Nikolai Gogol': Revizor," in id. (ed.): *Das Russische Drama*. Köln, Weimar, Wien, 163–87.

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the play *Balkanski špijun* (*The Balkan Spy*, 1982) by Serbian author Dušan Kovačević. The play's principal subject concerns a grotesque tragicomedy with ideologically induced paranoia in Socialist Yugoslavia. The play's main character is examined based on the typological and generic distinction between the figure of an amateur and a professional detective/spy, and in his relation to similar characters in the drama tradition of Eastern Europe (Gogol, Nušić). Paranoia, as a political and ideological phenomenon, is analyzed firstly in general theoretical terms and then within the specific socio-historical contexts of (Eastern European) Communism and Yugoslav Socialism. The relation of the play with the corpus of the so-called literature of *Goli otok* in Yugoslavia is also discussed. Concluding remarks concern the play's political significance and implications draw upon the interrelations between its comical, tragical and satirical features.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446508-019 - am 14.02.2026, 06:40:01. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -