

Balkan identity between the Orient and Europe in Milorad Pavić's "Dictionary of the Khazars"

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The traveler has a passport that is considered western in the East and eastern in the West. Her passport therefore causes suspicion in both East and West; it casts two shadows; to the right it is masculine and to the left feminine.
(Milorad Pavić, *Dictionary of the Khazars*, 1988)

INTRODUCTION

The Serbian novelist and literary historian Milorad Pavić is undoubtedly the most famous representative of Yugoslav postmodern literature. His best-known works include *Hazarski rečnik* (*Dictionary of the Khazars*, 1984, Eng. trans. 1988), *Predeo slikan čajem* (*Landscape Painted with Tea*, 1988, Eng. trans. 1990), *Unutrašnja strana vetra* (*The Inner Side of the Wind*, 1991, Eng. trans. 1993), and *Poslednja ljubav u Carigradu* (*Last Love in Constantinople*, 1994, Eng. trans. 1998). Pavić's topographical scope is centered in the Balkan Peninsula within the broader framework of Central and Eastern Europe, including such cities as Venice, Vienna, Prague, and Istanbul. Most of Pavić's characters are born or directly inhabit the Balkan countries, and some of them literally live at the edge of different spaces and times. Inhabitants of other areas are also present in Pavić's novels, but they are mostly only visitors, travelers, or somehow interconnected with the plot situated in the Balkan area or the surrounding places. By analyzing specific motifs of Pavić's conception of this region, we can reach a closer understanding of his approach towards the Balkans as a historical, cultural and (meta)geographical area. His narrative strategy was to adapt the discourse about the Balkans as the liminal and frontier space. It can be seen as a meeting point of two discursive modifications of Edward Said's Orientalism: Maria Todorova's Balkanism, which has been applied to Southeastern Europe, and Andre Gingrich's frontier Orientalism, which was based on the conditions of Central Europe. For Pavić's work, which represents the borderline between these two European subregions, I will suggest the term of "frontier internalism" as a complementary category that could help to illuminate this liminal space which had remained more or less blank.

THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF BALKANISM AND FRONTIER ORIENTALISM

Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978) has inspired many scholars to develop derivative terms more accurate for their specific problems, including Maria Todorova's Balkanism. But the term "Balkan" is somehow more ambiguous than the Orient, because it cannot be clearly defined in terms of East and West. Even if we consider historical and political polarities (Rome – Constantinople; Catholicism – Orthodoxy; capitalism – socialism) the demarcation line is unclear. For many Balkan nations and their representatives in the intelligentsia, the idea of a bridge or crossroad of civilization contacts became the pattern of their self-perception. Discursively the Balkan often appears as a somehow liminal space situated between both metageographical giants of East and West, which sometimes connects and sometimes divides them. As Todorova suggests:

The metaphor is evidently premised on the endorsement of an East-West dichotomy, an essentialized opposition, an accepted fundamental difference between Orient and Occident: "The Balkan peninsula is a region of transition between Asia and Europe – between 'East' and 'West' – with their incompatible political, religious and social ideals" (2009, 59).

Todorova herself claims that Balkanism is parallel rather than analogical to Orientalism, arguing that Balkanism is an independent discourse because in contrast to the Orient there was no historical colonial presence of any Western superpower in the Balkans. Hence, we cannot apply the theoretical contribution of postcolonial and subaltern studies for the specific Balkan circumstances. Similarly, Balkanism lacks its own scientific field which would be in the service of a colonial power and would product the discursive knowledge about the area as did the Oriental studies in Western colonies (44). The Western European discourse about the Balkan as the space defined as a field of cultural, political and historical confrontation of two opposite meta-geographical categories was also adopted by the Balkan inhabitants themselves. However in this sense the Balkans are not unique and such an approach is common also for countries of Central Europe (58).

Like Todorova's Balkanism, Andre Gingrich's concept of frontier Orientalism was a product of postcolonial theory, but its diffusion within Central European studies has been more limited than Todorova's within Balkan studies. According to Gingrich, it differs from Said's conception in specific ways:

First Said's concept of "orientalism" deals primarily with British and French colonial (and with postcolonial US foreign) relations. [...] Second, Said's concept does include the academic orientalism which I have left unconsidered in this text for several reasons. In central Europe, early academic orientalism of the 18th and early 19th centuries certainly did inform leading political opinions and strategies. It thereby interacted with public and folk culture which has been my focus here. [...] in that sense early academic orientalism merely provided additional elite contributions to images of the "Oriental" already current in folk and public culture before the rise of nationalism (1996, 118–119).

Gingrich defines frontier Orientalism as a "relatively coherent set of metaphors and myths that reside in public and folk culture. It places the home country and its population along an adjacent territorial and military borderline which is imbued

with a timeless mission” (119). Within Central and Southern Europe, Gingrich distinguishes the historical presence of three types of Orientalism. The first one is so-called “enlightened” Orientalism, which appeared in European, particularly German, music or literature. The second was “classical” Orientalism, locally consumed in its English, French or Italian versions. Both of these types were intended for the elites who were constructing and at the same time “consuming” this discourse. Frontier Orientalism represents a distinct branch characterized by important constructive role of elements from both elite and folk culture (121). Gingrich adds that this sort of Orientalism is not present in all parts of Europe (only in those parts which had direct borders with “Orientals”) nor in North America (120).

Milorad Pavić’s approach to the Balkans as a boundary between the Orient and Europe is connected to both Todorova’s Balkanism and Gingrich’s frontier Orientalism. However, I would propose the term “frontier internalism” as a more effective instrument to describe Pavić’s narrative method. In order to explain the term, it is necessary to mention complementary concepts associated with the postcolonial discussion about the Balkans. The literary theoretician Vesna Goldsworthy (1998) claims that the West colonizes the Balkan area in the sense of an “imagined colonization” or “imperialism of imagination”. According to her, the West draws from the Balkans the resources for its imagination, literature, art, pop-culture and entertainment industry. The Balkans is a constructed scene where exotic adventures full of bloody and horrifying performances take place. Although Pavić was not an author belonging to either the horror or adventure genre, he filled his “Balkan scene” with exotic figures, environments and situations. In many aspects Pavić had “borrowed” the Balkan scene stereotypically designed by the Western imagination to situate his own stories. The process of such adaptation of Western discourse of Balkanism could be explained with the help of the Bulgarian historian Alexander Kiossev who introduced the concept of “self-colonizing cultures”. According to Kiossev (1993) these cultures copy the Western cultural patterns even if they are not directly subjected to colonial oppression. The trauma of colonization of the mind is caused by the location “in a liminal space, neither developed nor underdeveloped, neither learned nor wholly ignorant, in the process of becoming mature Europeans” (Kuus quoted in Obad 2008, 19). In this sense Balkan people are perceived as “incomplete Europeans” (Čolović 2008, 5).

Accordingly, the Western discourse about the Balkans as the liminal frontier was (in the sense of Kiossev’s “self-colonisation”) internalized by the Balkan inhabitants themselves and became a significant pillar of their identity. As Todorova asserts: “For many Balkan nations and their representatives from the intelligentsia, the idea of a bridge or crossroad of civilization contacts became the pattern of their self-perception” (58). Consequently, this internalized pattern became the constitutive part of the ways that Balkan cultural elites and representatives refer to their countries and outwardly present Balkan cultural specifics to the rest of the world. This presentation is based on a specific self-exoticizing narrative manner founded on the emphasis of an adapted attitude towards the Balkans which is considered as a suitable stage for exotic scenes.

In short, by the term “frontier internalism” I understand two mutually complementary meanings. Firstly, the term refers to the fact that the Balkanism and the Western discourse about the Balkans as a liminal area became *internalized* by Balkan inhabitants themselves and consequently it refers to a specific narrative that they developed from their special (meta)geographical position. Pavić is the exemplary representative of this kind of literal narration, which could possibly make the insufficiently discovered and liminal world *within* the frontier more visible.

THE POSTMODERN (META)GEOGRAPHY OF DREAMS

Pavić’s point of view regarding the position of the Balkans vis-à-vis the frontier is ambivalent. The lives and mutual relationships of Pavić’s characters are not limited by their relationship to the political and historical frontiers. However, the plots of his novels are contextualized to the concrete historical circumstances, which often remain only a backdrop that does not necessarily affect the interactions and relations between figures. While the conditions of the story are historical and political, the behavior of the characters is largely situational. As we can see in the *Dictionary of the Khazars*, the modus operandi of his figures is parallel to rather than dependent on the historical reality. Pavić’s conception of the relationship between historical circumstances and actors settled in the frontier area, corresponds to the historical reality in a surprisingly authentic way. Pavić does not follow the approach which Gingrich calls “the one-dimensional tale of bloodshed and war” (1996, 110). The actions of Pavić’s heroes are not a matter of political, ethnical or religious identity, but a matter of situational advantage. They act in similar manner as the peasants and city dwellers mentioned by Gingrich, who did not hesitate to flee from the Habsburg monarchy to areas controlled by Ottomans in order to avoid the burden imposed by their own Austrian rulers (Prickler quoted in Gingrich 1996, 110).

Pavić’s most successful novel internationally, *Dictionary of the Khazars*, is not primarily set along the Danube or even within the Balkans. Its main topic is the religious conversion of the extinct nation of the Khazars in the 8th or 9th century, and it is divided into three books which represent fictional Christian, Muslim and Jewish sources about this conversion. Each “source” represents a different narrative about the circumstances of conversion in order to convince the readers that Khazars accepted the Christian, Muslim or Jewish religion respectively. The structure of novel lacks any chronology and actors enter the plot from various historical times. Amongst them there are also 20th century scientists (with the background of all three Abrahamic religions) who unsuccessfully try to discover to which religion Khazars actually converted. Vital collaboration and communication between representatives of various cultural backgrounds appears as the fundamental element in Pavić’s search for Balkan identity. Pavić’s conception apparently does not fit to the popular one-dimensional tale set of myths summarily called as *antemurale christianitatis* myths. This term (literally “bulwark of Christianity”) designates the belief that the historical role of a certain nation was to guard the Christianity against Muslim aggressors. This discourse became the constitutive part of national identity of some (not only) Balkan nations (Čolović 2008, 13). Pavić did not perceive the Balkan as a space behind the

frontier, but as the frontier itself. The kingdom of the Khazars, standing on the crossroad and sphere of interest of three great civilizations (Christian, Muslim and Jewish) is an allegory for the Yugoslavia or the Balkans.

The Danube plays the crucial role as the meta-geographic Balkan frontier. According to the generally recognized thesis of the Serbian geographer Jovan Cvijić (1865–1927), the Balkan Peninsula is located south-east of the Danube and south of the Sava River (Jezernik 1998, 14). Despite the fact that the Danube as a borderline should reduce the polysemic potential of the Balkans and ensure the strict geographic neutrality of the term, in the collective representations the Danube remains the point of division of two qualitatively opposite metageographic dichotomies. The symbolical position of Danube is well illustrated by the 19th century British traveler John Fraser, who noticed in his traveling diary a following memory about the crossing of Danube towards the Balkans: “It was like running from life to the arms of death. I just could not stop thinking about Charon and the river Styx” (Hodgson 1991, 15). The Danube has a significant position also in Pavić’s prose, but this role, like Pavić’s understanding of the Balkans, is ambiguous. The Danube is “one of four heavenly rivers – symbolizing the allegorical level in the Bible” (1998, 85) and at the same time it is (similarly to the Balkans) a liminal space which connects actors from historical cultural areas (especially the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires) and could be at the same time the borderline and the point of struggle between different civilizations.

In *Dictionary of the Khazars*, the banks of the Danube represent the scene of the battle between the Ottomans and Habsburgs. At this place the multireligious trio of “dream hunters” (the Christian Avram Branković, the Muslim Jusuf Masudi and the Jewish Samuel Cohen) finish their mundane pilgrimage. The denying of chronology, dreaming-like (dis)continuity of time, and interchangeability of time and space are very remarkable parts of Pavić’s narrative strategy. As a member of the Branković family “which distinguish[ed] themselves in military battle on the border of two centuries and two states – the Hungarian and the Turkish,” Avram Branković typically adapts his actions according to a particular situation: “It has been said ever since that the Brankoviches of Erdély count in Tzintzar, lie in Walachian, are silent in Greek, sing hymns in Russian, are cleverest in Turkish, and speak their mother tongue – Serbian – only when they intend to kill” (1988, 25). Branković serves as a commander in Austrian-Turkish wars and is also hired as a diplomat, working for the English envoy in Constantinople. During the Turkish attack on the Austrian position, Branković is killed by the Jew Cohen, who is fighting in the Ottoman army. When Branković dies, he is also accompanied by his servant, the Anatolian Muslim Jusuf Masudi. The concept of the *Dictionary of the Khazars*, where particular stories are narrated in three different ways (Christian, Muslim and Jewish sources on the Khazar question), is an analogy to the discrepancies between the vivid everyday life microhistories and historical “one-dimensional” tale narrative, formulated by general public discourse.

FRONTIER, LIMINALITY AND THE FOLK TRADITION MOTIFS

The motifs of Balkan folklore and the oral tradition are very frequent in Pavić's prose. Pavić borrows the magical matter from the traditional folk imagination, superstitions and magic practices, and the application of magical motifs has multiple effects. Firstly, by integrating magical powers and supernatural beings like devils, witches, ghosts, *Moras* or vampires, Pavić draws the specific atmosphere of the places where his stories are situated. Consequently, by integrating the liminal beings that stand between two worlds (e. g. those of life and death) Pavić also accents the liminality and ambiguity of the Balkan area and its inhabitants. Moreover, even a whole country or ethnic group could be portrayed as the community standing on the threshold between the ordinary and the numinous as is the case with Branković in the *Dictionary of the Khazars*: "he fought in Walachia, where, Satan claimed, every man is born a poet, lives like a thief, and dies a vampire" (125). Later in the book Pavić writes: "Namely, it was said that she had been Mora as a girl, became a witch when she married, and after her death would be a vampire for three years. Not everybody believed this third part, because it was held that vampires were most often Turks, less often Greeks, and never Jews" (269). Pavić's literary vision is a unique synthesis of his own imagination with matter from traditional sources, as in the case of the story from the Hungarian-Romanian border region:

One night in Gyüla, Father came across an enormous snowman seated on the hole of the latrine. He struck him with the lantern, killed him, and went to dinner. Dinner was cabbage soup with boar meat. He tasted the soup and, all of a sudden – plop! – his head fell into the bowl. He kissed his own image sticking out of the bowl and drowned in the cabbage soup. Right there before our very eyes, before we realized what was happening. To this day I recall that while he was drowning in the soup he acted as though he were embracing a woman, put his arms around the wooden bowl as if he were holding not a boar but the head of another being. In short, we buried him as if we were wrenching him from someone's powerful embrace... And we threw his boot into the Muresul so that he would not become a vampire (51).

However, Pavić does not only borrow from folklore but, in particular occasions, "pretends" that he offers the folk material and somehow creates a literal "pseudo-folklore". Pavić refers to folk music (e. g. folk story song about the relationship between Lady Ephrosinia Luccari and Count Dracula or gusle songs about Avram Branković) or to folk legends about ascetic hermits (e. g. the entry "Stylite") and saints (85, 101).

Mythological and folk fairytale patterns are also evident in the way how the place determines the destiny of the hero. In Slavic fairytales the spatial change causes the change of the hero's destiny (Bocánová 2017, 266–267). As Sanja Bošković claims on the account of the Slavic folklore elements in Pavić's work, the change of location of certain object causes a change in its destiny and that will influence the sacred structure of the universe. The consequential anxiety is reflected in our dreams (2002–2003, 353). Sensual irrationality and at the same time the mystical wisdom combined with a certain kind of "holy madness" become a typical feature of Pavić's characters. His figures are psychologically ambiguous and contrary, but not in the sense of the

binary opposite trickster archetype that includes positive-negative dichotomy in the same character. Perhaps all his figures appear as people who are able to pronounce deep and profound existential wisdom and subsequently act or speak in a purely foolish, entirely absurd and comic way. In this sense Pavić's characters are reminiscent of the legendary smart-foolish and dignified-comic Turkish Sufi Nasreddin Hodja. Nasreddin Hodja is a popular figure in folktales and literature especially in the Middle East, Central Asia, India and the Balkans, but we can also spot the presence of the Nasreddin Hodja narrative tradition in wider geographical scope (see Sabatos 2016). Despite the fact that there is no evidence of Pavić's direct inspiration by Nasreddin's character, I assume that Nasreddin Hodja is a proper archetype that could define the common fundamentals of Pavić's figures. Nasreddin Hodja crosses the frontier that divides socially conformist behavior from exotic eccentricity and, at the same time, as a folklore and literary motif, crosses the frontiers of the Orient, Balkans and Europe, like the characters in Pavić's stories.

THE POLEMIC ON BALKAN QUESTION AND PAVIĆ'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY

In one of the most influential Western interpretations of Pavić's work, Andrew Wachtel has read the *Dictionary of the Khazars* as Pavić's postmodern project of the philosophical demolition of Yugoslavia. Wachtel argues that the *Dictionary* is an ultimate challenge to the legacy of Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina* (1945). While Andrić implied the hope that microhistories, nationalist micronarratives and differences can be bridged, history can be demystified, and it is possible to find a common truth, that would satisfy and unite all fractions, Pavić's *Dictionary* is anti-Yugoslav and denies any possibility to build a unifying truth (638). According to Wachtel, Pavić suggests that there is no chance to bridge three mutually incompatible narratives and thus he contributed philosophically to the break-down of Yugoslavia. Referring to the Yugoslav writer Danilo Kiš, Wachtel claims that the relativism is corollary to nationalism and thus Pavić's relativistic postmodern perspective is in fact nationalist (635).

When journalists asked Pavić to explain the *Dictionary of the Khazars*, he pointed to the universality of his novel and claimed that it was about "how the nation looks when it stands between great ideologies but does not belong to any of them" (638). In response to this, Andrew Wachtel states:

In the context of the time, most Yugoslav readers would probably have felt that the 'nation' to which Pavić was referring was Yugoslavia, not Serbia. Following this line of reasoning, they would have seen the book as an attempt to revisit one of the central post-1948 Yugoslav obsessions: the possibility of finding the unique place for itself as a land between, but not part of, East and West (refigured in the post-war period as the capitalist countries of NATO and the Soviet Union and its Warsaw pact allies) (638).

Some of Wachtel's viewpoints have been criticized by Tatjana Aleksić, who argues that Wachtel wrongly understands the postmodernism as the continuation of Modernist tradition. She also cites Yugoslavian writers who were postmodernists but not nationalists (2009, 87 and 100). Wachtel's interpretation of the *Dictionary* as a book

which advocates the fragmentation of Yugoslavia is not fully convincing, because in all three versions of the narrative about the Khazars' conversion, Pavić's figures do not mutually interact in an exclusionary manner. If the *Dictionary* is a literary representation of postmodern relativism and perspectivism, then why does Pavić not privilege one perspective above another? Exclusionary tendencies are hinted at in the particular narratives that are constructed according to the religious affiliation of those who interpreted the "sources" to Khazar question. These interpretations of "sources" remain politically motivated construction of nationalist "one-dimensional" national building myth. From this angle it is possible to read the *Dictionary* quite contrary to Wachtel: not as nationalist apologetic but as a critique of nationalism. While the political aspect of Pavić's work cannot be denied, the powers that aim at the fragmentation (or so called "Balkanization") of Yugoslavia seem to be external rather than internal in Pavić's understanding.

Yugoslavia (as by extension, the Balkans) is defined in Pavić's conception as a multicultural and liminal entity which is discursively constructed and as a space where the political ambitions of the surrounding superpowers from the West and East encounter each other. Even if we can accept postmodernism as the continuation of modernity and consequently accept that Pavić represented a certain kind of postmodern nationalism, his tendencies projected onto the *Dictionary* do not appear in the form of "traditional" ethnically based nationalism (as the product of so called modernity). In Pavić's conception the quasi-nationalistic tensions do not primarily appear between particular nations but rather between great and small formations of nations or civilizations. The hostility within the formations of small nations seems to be the result of outwardly implemented new cultural, economical or political paradigms as we could analogically see in the story of the Khazars who were fragmented due to new religions which were substituted for the original religion of this small nation. The Khazar society was not divided till the time of proselytizing missions of three contesting religions:

Take this as a powerful and ultimate warning, my lord, as the greatest words of wisdom! Have nothing to do with things that involve the three worlds of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism here on earth, so that we may have nothing to do with their underworlds. For those who hate one another are not the problem in this world. They always resemble one another. Enemies are always the same, or become so with time, for they could not be enemies otherwise. It is those who actually differ among themselves who pose the greatest danger. They long to meet one another, because their differences do not bother them. And they are the worst. We and our enemies will combine forces to fight those who allow us to differ from them and do not let this difference disturb their sleep; we will destroy them in one fell swoop from three sides... (52)

From this point of view, we could understand the new religion in the *Dictionary of the Khazars* as an allegory for nationalism, which replaced the previous era of Khazar unity without emphasizing differences within their empire.

Pavić, as a scholar well-grounded in history, was undoubtedly aware of the fact that nationalism was brought to the Balkans as a strategic tool for weakening the Ottoman Empire. The Great Powers provided massive financial and political support

for the national emancipation of Balkan nations (Karakasidou 2002, 577) and every superpower had its favorite amongst the Balkan nations beginning in the first third of the 19th century (Todorova 2009, 137). Many academics claim external influences as the primary source of nationalism, and Westernization as the cause of Balkanization (see Jezernik 2007, Buchowski 2006). Pavić's blaming of the West for the nationalism and consequent Balkanization of Yugoslavia is evident in one of the final scenes of the *Dictionary*, when a four-year-old Belgian boy shoots and kills Dr. Muawia at the moment when he is going to show his Jewish colleague Dr. Schultz the historical documents which could definitely reveal the truth about the Khazar conversion. If the Khazars are really a metaphorical representation of Yugoslavia, then due to the fatal intervention of a young Westerner, all fractions were left in the nationalist dreaming about their own relativist version of historical micronarratives, without any possibility of uncovering a mutually compatible and unifying truth.

However, Pavić does not represent a clearly "agnostic" position: the ultimate truth that moderates the differences and connects various narratives (and where the dreams of every human being meet) exists and is symbolized through the body of Adam Cadmon. We can reduce the meaning of the *Dictionary* to a merely political manifest only when we ignore the frequency and richness of the symbols from several religious and mystic traditions (that often principally jump over the boundaries of established collective religious categories). The message of the *Dictionary* has also a theological level: the truth exists, yet it is not immanent but transcendental. As we could see in the stories of "dream hunters" who were collecting human dreams to put together the picture of Adam Cadmon's body, or in the stories of the scientists representing three great civilizations and collecting facts to discover the full truth about the history of Khazar question, one can discover this ultimate truth only through death. The inclusion and unification of various elements into the coherent picture could result in the sacred quality of object also at the mundane level. This approach was applied not only to Yugoslavia, but to the entire Balkans. The dialogue of traditions and intercultural collaboration seems to be essential for Pavić's perception of the region's cultural and historical heritage, and determinative for his quest of Balkan identity.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to interpret Milorad Pavić's work through a single theoretical approach. In my interpretation of his work, Pavić considers the Balkans as a liminal frontier area and deals with the stereotypes that are connected to them by intentionally emphasizing the Otherness and exoticism ascribes to the Balkan peoples. In Pavić's stories the wars against the Turks play only the role of the historical condition without additional attitudes towards the Ottomans or reproductions of Serbian nationalist myths. Although Pavić used motifs from folk culture, they are not derived from antagonism against the Turks (even though Serbian folk material is rich in this sense). Pavić does not reproduce the "frontier Orientalism" narrative, either from the perspective of developing the folk/public discourse or as the representative of an elite culture. The gap (or frontier) between those who Orientalize and those who are

Orientalized is not as narrow as it seems, and the complementary term of “frontier internalism” can be applied to this area.

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Frontier Orientalism. Balkanism. Milorad Pavić. Orientalism. Balkan identity.

This article analyzes the cultural, historical and religious contexts of Milorad Pavić's post-modern novel *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Its aim is to analyze the role of Oriental, Balkan and European literary and folkloric motifs as the means of Pavić's original narrative strategy. Another goal is to discuss whether Pavić's employment of these motifs could be framed in terms of Gingrich's concept of frontier Orientalism, or should be conceptualized by other categories. Pavić's approaches toward the Balkan's common identity seems to be more likely based on the idea of a crossroad than the idea of "no man's land" of liminal frontier area. The author discusses the accuracy of applying already existing theoretical concepts to Pavić's works and tries to propose conceptual instruments that would enable to see the work of this postmodern writer in a more accurate manner.

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