

Pregledni rad  
821.163.4.09 Kiš D.

**John K. COX (Fargo)**

North Dakota State University

john.cox1@ndsu.edu

### CHANCE ENCOUNTERS: DANILO KIŠ, PERSONAL HISTORY, AND WORLD LITERATURE

Kao omaž rođendanu Danila Kiša (1935–1989), ovaj kratak osvrt donosi refleksije balkanskoga historičara koji je istovremeno i književni prevodilac koji se djelima Danila Kiša bavi duže od deceniju. Fokus osvrta je na historijskoj autentičnosti i globalnoj prirodi Kišove fikcije, zajedno s ličnim refleksijama na mjesta gdje je Kiš živio i radio.

Ključne riječi: *Danilo Kiš, prevođenje, poezija, književna etika, globalna književnost, Subotica (Szabadka), istorija kao disciplina*

This talk is intended to commemorate the birthday of one of the greatest writers of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Kiš had strong, lifelong connections to Montenegro, so I think it is very appropriate that your university wishes to call attention to the enduring legacy of his works – in the form of essays, dramas, poetry, short stories, and, above all, novels. The notions of „personal history“ and „accidental encounters“ in this talk are important as they apply Kiš, not me, since my only goal is to circulate some thoughts about him that might be fresh or challenging. But I will also mention a few of the circumstances that accompanied the beginning of my engagement with Kiš's works and ideas, but only as an attempt at amusement, or for the closing of a formal circle. With the phrase „global literature“, I hope to underscore not only how important and popular, but also how enduringly bold, the writing of Danilo Kiš has proven to be.

Danilo Kiš's **personal history** begins, of course, with his birth, which he described as „an ethnographic rarity“. The wide spread of the roots and branches that delineate his life live in the Vojvodina, Montenegro, Belgrade, Hungary, and in Yugoslav, Jewish, and French culture. A strikingly coherent and successful artistic life was the product of these cultures, clashes, and individual vision and determination. People familiar with Kiš's biography, in addition to his works, might recall the terrifying events of January, 1942 in Novi Sad, which the future writer survived only by chance, an early blaze on his trail through

the Shoah. What follows is Kiš's trek through, and past, singularly parallel ideological and cultural formations: fascism and communism, Central Europe and the Balkans. On a much different register, consider the timing of Kiš's literary life, that is to say, the nature of the era in which he wrote: the period of late modernism, on the cusp of post-modernism, so that when Kiš returns to the essay, by which I mean topical non-fiction explorations in prose, the milieu and the metier have shifted radically. The sense of *C'as anatomije* is much different from 1960's *Izlet u Pariz*, or his early essays on poetic revolutions, for instance.

My first encounter with Kiš's work was in 1990. I was in the early years of graduate school at Indiana University and had, of course, heard my professor's mention his writing. But I had not yet read anything, not even *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, which was the introduction to his world for most of us. The encounter occurred during my language proficiency exam in Serbo-Croatian. After four semesters of study, I had to take an extra-curricular exam to satisfy program requirements in History and in the Russian and East European Institute. The two professors I faced---one American, one Croatian---marched me through a conversation exam and then handed me a single piece of xeroxed paper with an article in Cyrillic script. I had to translate the article, unaided, at a nearby desk. The article was an obituary for Danilo Kiš. Kiš had passed away just months before. It made a huge impression upon me that my professors thought so highly of Kiš that they used this text in their teaching. And years later I found this same article from the Yugoslav press as I was researching for the historical introduction to one of Danilo's novels. It reminded me, an almost tearful me, that when studying in Szeged, Hungary, in 1986 and 1987, I went many times to Szabadka, or Subotica. It was a simple hop across the border with a US passport, and my two pals and I went to this town, the town where Kiš was born, on many an early-morning local train run, in search of Jaffa oranges, toilet paper, which was in critically short supply in Hungary that winter, JUGOTON cassettes like those by the Talking Heads and U2, and *Pionir Mlečna čokolada sa rižom*. (We did not even discover *bureks* till a later trip that year to Sarajevo.) We also explored Novi Sad, which we found to be a fascinating mixture of the self-confident and quaint, the bold and the bizarre. I had no idea what either of these cities meant to Kiš then. I would not even have recognized his name. But he has won. He prevailed, and of course time has yoked all the significations into the service of a popular front of memories.

And so what might it mean to refer to Danilo Kiš in the context of **global literature**? Sure, he's famous. All over the place. In many languages of the world. Certifiably, and justifiably famous. But, as with the concept of „world history“, „global“ or „world“ literature is more than „the greatest hits of various countries“. It is about convergences, influences, asymmetric but reciprocal

influences, and it is more about cultures or societies than just parallel polities. Remember Kiš's recounting of the luminaries of European poetry and prose, and his questioning of its arbitrariness, linked to the (self-)importance of the „major“ languages? The Kiš who suggested taking some of the West European writers out of the canon and replacing them with Endre Ady, Ivo Andrić, Miloš Crnjanski, and Miroslav Krleža? This is the same Kiš who recognized that Central Europe is more than Danubia and that the Ottoman legacy is part of European culture. Erasing, evicting, enabling, and encoding difference: these are processes of globalization in literature.

A section of Kiš's artistic ethos, where he combines his thoughts on literature and history, is also global. He sought unobstructed views for his focus, unhindered by place, age, or calculations of utility.

Consider these pointed assertions of his, rendered here as paraphrases or quotes:

– Literature provides the death of a child, writ small, and historical disasters, writ large, with a sense and a significance and a chance at resistance to despair;

– and I quote Kis quoting Jean-Paul Sartre, „The writer's job is to acquaint everyone with the world so no one can claim innocence“;  
and:

– Yugoslavia „pulped a whole branch of literature“ by cheapening memoirs that sought to plumb the paradoxes of lived experience rather than serve political or commercial ends.

The combined effect of beliefs like these is that Kis wanted to do more than commemorate suffering or chronicle a disappearing civilization, or even pursue what he called the muddy quest for his father. And to do those things already commands our respect and even reverence. But Kis's untrammelled focus was global because the many elements of its genetic code included keeping the individual in history and keeping history in human time. Systems exclude; people, even in Kis's unsentimental rendering, dies as outsiders, or they include.

In conclusion, I'd like to share one of my favorite characterizations of Kiš: that he had a fresh historical mind. There are writers who are capable of immersing themselves, and their readers, in unexpected time periods and places. This is a kind of attraction and innovation that is separate, I would argue, from the form of their works, however innovative it may or may not be. I am referring here to Kiš's short story *The Legend of the Sleepers*, which is found in *Encyclopedia of the Dead* and was ably translated back in 1989 by Michael Henry Heim. There are writers, like E. L. Doctorow, Graham Greene, and Ralph Ellison in English, whose intense dramatic gaze and loping but

hard-won historical fluency pull the writer into immediate explorations. Of unexpected places. This unexpected – and rare – power of Danilo Kiš's work was one of the last of his gifts to become clear to me. It turns out that Kiš also left behind one unfinished novel. It is also entitled *The Legend of the Sleepers*, or, alternately, *The Sleepers of Efes*. This text, well over one hundred pages in length, was written in the late 1960s. Perhaps it would be a fitting conclusion to my engagement with Kiš's *oeuvre* to translate this lengthy fragment someday.

At the risk of appearing self-absorbed, I would like to close with a brief poem that I wrote in Belgrade about eleven years ago. This was not a chance encounter, but rather very much a planned one, at the spot in the Novo Groblje where Kiš is buried. But I was in mid-arc of translating so much of his writing into English, and the poem, for me, captures the feeling of what it was like when I felt and thought that perhaps I was finally comprehending the big picture of Danilo's encounters with the 20<sup>th</sup> century: I was getting it, from a distance both temporal and geographic, from the beauty of his words to his ethics and consistent vision of life.

**magical bugs**

*(an hour at the grave of danilo kiš)*

for all the worlds

on the periphery of nothing

man of loss

iron seed, muddy rain, chains of leaf and lyric and sun

carnival of colored eyes

colonies of ideas

entangle

hunger

conjure

sing carve fold splash pound for the deserted revelation

(Beograd, Novo groblje, 13. XII 2010)

**John K. COX**

**CHANCE ENCOUNTERS: DANILO KIŠ, PERSONAL HISTORY,  
AND WORLD LITERATURE**

To mark the birthday of Danilo Kiš (1935 – 1989), this short talk contains the reflections of a Balkan historian who is also a literary translator and has been engaged with Kiš's works for over a decade. The main points of the talk are the historicity and global nature of Kiš's fiction, along with personal reflections on places where Kiš lived and worked.

Key words: *Danilo Kiš, translation, poetry, literary ethics, global literature, Subotica (Szabadka), history as a discipline*