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## APHOCALYPSE NOW!

### An Introduction to Serbian Satirical Aphorisms

Did you ever believe a Chinese fortune cookie?

Of course not. They are as tasteless as they are dull, and their proverbial messages have been so much chewed upon that they've long lost any kind of truthful flavor.

CUT through time and space, here comes the new fast food prophecy – the Serbian satirical aphorism, postmodern style.

Just like a mix of cultures and torrents has shaped the delicious, highly caloric Serbian cuisine, so have the political and social circumstances in post-WWII Yugoslavia patched up another kind of fulfilling intellectual aphrodisiac – the one-or-two-liner aphorism, the best possible embodiment of Serbia's trademark ironic morale.

But first of all, a disclaimer. Most Westerners make the simplifying mistake of calling any proverb or famous literary quote - an aphorism. There are many web pages and anthologies of such 'false' aphorisms quoting what Plato and Tcheckhov said about their caves or their guns, or paraphrasing Murphy's laws and Chinese fortune-cookie sayings.

An aphorism, as defined and practiced in Serbia, is a short, sharp, linguistically effective sentence or two, which imperatively contains an unexpected twist and which describes in a most striking, clairvoyant way the hidden truth of some common social matters or states of mind.

What makes Serbian aphorisms different from classic proverbs is their multilayered, open-ended nature, their surprisingly creative wordplays, their unpretentious individualism and their killer dose of black humor, satire and merciless sarcasm that still conveys a strong humanistic message.

Such satirical aphorisms appeared after WW2 in totalitarian countries of Eastern Europe where oppression was looser than elsewhere, namely in Poland and in the former Yugoslavia.

What started as an *exercice de style* of a few courageous writers quickly became picked up by ordinary people, and by the 1960s hundreds of amateur aphorists joined the movement, known in Serbia as the *Belgrade Aphoristic Circle*.

The main theme back then was an ironic criticism of the so-called "better life", a *leitmotiv* of communist demagoguery, which had to be done in a stylishly veiled, indirect way so as to avoid censorship. The main goal was to restore a sense of individuality, dignity and psychological integrity of a confused and misled population.

After the 1980s, the situation in Poland calmed down, but the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia provided Serbian aphorists with a variety of inspiring new topics: civil wars & civic rights, hyperinflation & hypermarkets, UN sanctions & peacekeeping missions, untouchable mafias & great dictators, endless transitions & democratic limitations...

In general, the more difficult and hopeless the times in which we live are, the more repression, stupidity and lie there is -- the more fertile and intense the spiritual resistance of the aphorists will be.

This connection is strongly expressed by Aleksandar Baljak, Serbia's most prominent aphorist, when he 'optimistically' predicts: *Our best aphorisms were created in difficult times, but for our modern satire - better days lie ahead.*



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A synthesis of literary art and colloquial philosophy, an aphorism reveals the depths of reality and discloses its true, ugly face. It has a demystifying, sobering role, but it also contains a concealed love and understanding for human misconceptions.

It is not a cheap thrill for the idle like a joke or a stand-up comedy one-liner, but a brave ethical act aimed at destroying everything that is unworthy, bad and fake in a society, but also inside ourselves.

This is why aphorisms can be a great way for empowering the individual; for asking or answering controversial questions; for accusing without moralizing; for apologizing without humiliating; for awareness raising; for self-criticism; for social introspection...

Aphorisms are inspiring both for those who make them and for those who read them. When you invent or hear such a fantastic diagnosis of a situation, you almost don't care what happens next, because you are already sure that you have understood it all, and that's what we're all here about.

In a time when the human rights industry has become nothing more than a big fundraising competition which benefits only the most shameless hustlers and whiners, our frail civilization deserves to have empowering tools that are freely available to all.

People in Serbia read affordable aphorism booklets in buses and waiting rooms, during lunch breaks or literary evenings, laughing on their own like happy lunatics. Aphorisms also appear in newspapers and radio shows, and the best ones get picked up in slang, graffiti, street protests or screenplay lines.

I myself have systematically collected aphorisms for the last ten years. Whenever I wonder why I am still living in this crazy country after years of civil wars, domestic repression and international satanization, I turn to my collection of aphorisms for reassuring consolation and a 100%-proof optimism fix.

Understanding the world around you, fighting back at the Gods with pen and paper, turning satire into a state of mind – it really means transcending it all. All of a sudden, a wasted childhood becomes an asset; terminal living in Serbia – a privilege.

From this perspective, Serbia stops being a traumatized, post-war country lost in transition, and turns into a stylish crossroads full of off-beat characters trying to contribute to a better understanding of this world by making up great lines.

These authors – vagabonds, politicians, psychiatrists, dentists, postmen, winemakers... - have no illusions that they can change anything, but they also can't bear to stay idle, so they do a brilliant service to humanity – they make their ingenious comments public. If they can't change the world around us, at least they can change our perception of this world. More than often, this is more than enough.

From now on, this website will feature a section on Serbian satirical aphorisms. It will probably be the part that you read first and that you remember the most. Occasionally, however, please remind yourselves where all this small wisdom originated from.

**Boris Mitić**

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