

KUNDERA'S STRUGGLE WITH KITSCH – ON *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS* OF BEING ONCE AGAIN

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Many controversies have arisen over the years around the Czech, and, since 1981, also French writer Milan Kundera. Their detailed analysis, or even a brief outline, would provide enough material for a separate, extensive paper. For the purposes of this essay, however, it is enough to state that Kundera has as many admirers of his talent as opponents, who admonish his work, and accuse the writer himself of preaching platitudes and inherent bias. Written in 1984, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* enjoys a special place in Kundera's oeuvre. First of all, the author intended the work to be a fierce polemic with a specific way of understanding kitsch. Secondly, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is one of the writer's two novels, which have been adapted for the silver screen. In this case, the reason for such an unspectacular marriage of literature and cinema was Kundera's total and absolute ban on all film and television adaptations.

The Czech writer has had some really bad experiences with transpositions of his works – both with translations and adaptations for other media. As described in his *Art of the Novel*, the verification of translations of *The Joke* was particularly traumatizing (Kundera 1988), prompting him to prepare a glossary of sorts. He wrote down sixty-three key words – or, as he described them, trap-words and his beloved words featured in his novels, which – if misunderstood – could lead to the misinterpretation of his books and, consequently, to bad translations. The letter 'T' features the term 'testament'. A word distinguished from others, because it does not refer to Kundera's prose as much as being a *memento* of sorts. Kundera (1988: 52) wrote:

TESTAMENT. Nowhere in the world nor in any form whatsoever may there occur the publication or reproduction of anything I ever wrote (or will write), except for the books of mine listed in the most recent Gallimard catalog. And no annotated editions. No adaptations.

Kundera's reluctance to critical publications results from his charming, yet a bit tiresome need to explain to the reader everything that the author considers necessary for the understanding of his artistic concept, and a bit of hysterical reluctance to leave this task to others, for example to critics. There were two film adaptations of his books, already mentioned above. The first one, from 1969, was a film version of *The Joke* directed by Jaromil Jireš (Kundera had a say in writing the script). The second, the famous Hollywood adaptation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* directed by Philip Kaufman in 1988, was the one which led the writer to ban any and all film adaptations. In the first Czech edition of the book, published in Brno in 2006, this ban becomes somewhat of a part of the novel itself – one of the first pages contains a statement: 'Any film, theatre and television adaptations are forbidden.'

As Maria Poprzęcka, an expert in kitsch, claims, works of art do not respond well to transpositions, or 'transferring from one mode of expression to another, from one medium to another' (Poprzęcka 1998: 220). The fault lies in the incorrectness of the language into which the work is transposed. This language 'results in an inadequate effect which can also be in bad taste' (Poprzęcka 1998: 220). It is not known whether it was this bad taste what Kundera pointed out when he claimed that the film adaptation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* did not have too much in common with the spirit of his novel *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, nor with the characters created by him¹. The author's brief remark regarding the film meant that in his opinion only the surface layer of his novel had survived the transposition process, this lightness, manifested especially in the erotic sphere². There is no doubt that, regardless of any personal likes or dislikes for the novel, its well-thought-out, seven-part structure, the sixth part of which being

¹ <http://www.csfd.cz/film/5026-nesnesitelná-lehkost-byti/zajimavosti/?type=film> [accessed: 14.02.2019].

² See: <http://iliteratura.cz/Clanek/20139/kundera-milan-nesnesitelná-lehkost-byti> [accessed: 14.02.2019].

the famous polyphonic passage on kitsch, which also serves as a keystone for the structure of the entire book and the key to its understanding, was transposed into a film telling a story of a difficult, but beautiful love in politically unfavorable times. Ironically, the novel, which was intended to be a passionate discussion with kitsch, a meta-reflection on the novel as the last bastion of the fight against it (Kundera 1988: 142), became popular thanks to the film, which reduced the novel to an almost kitschy story itself.

Kundera's voice in the discussion on kitsch has become one of both canonical and cult statements, which may not be omitted by any respectable study on this subject. In his understanding of kitsch, Kundera undoubtedly follows that of Hermann Broch, who in his famous essay *Notes on the Problem of Kitsch* (1950) defines this concept from a specifically psychological perspective – as an art being a reflection of a specific human being, who likes kitsch and wants to reproduce it, and for whom it constitutes a necessary mirror that counterfeits and beautifies the real image. For Kundera, kitsch, as an issue, is both existential and emotional in nature. The main characters of the novel – Tereza, Tomáš, Sabina and Franz, involved in complex emotional and erotic relationships, are constantly exposed to kitsch by the author. Here, Kundera's reflection once again touches upon Broch, who understood kitsch as an antithesis of art, its inherent evil, 'Antichrist' potential, capable of being activated at any moment (Broch 1969: 63). The author of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* seems to subject the protagonists to specific experiments, which aim – as he himself commented in *The Art of The Novel* – at grasping, in line with the idea of the existential novel, the essence of the unique code of their lives (Kundera 1988: 34). The author leaves us under no illusions about the 'realism' and 'authenticity' of the characters. For him, they are an 'experimental self', created to understand his own possible ways of life that never really happened (Kundera 1988: 35). The world they live in is somewhat of a test for them. This is the reality of a totalitarian state built on the foundation of kitsch. The entire long essay devoted to it is anticipated in the novel by reflections on Sabina's painting. The protagonist accidentally discovers the key to understanding the surrounding world. To understanding and demystifying it. Forced to adhere to the principles of socialist realism at the university, the painter decides to be stricter than her professors and paints pictures so realistic that they resemble color photography. A painting

showing the construction of the steelworks is such a picture from years ago. Sabina, recalling it, states:

Here is a painting I happened to drip red paint on. At first I was terribly upset, but then I started enjoying it. The trickle looked like a crack; it turned the building site into a battered old backdrop, a backdrop with a building site painted on it. I began playing with the crack, filling it out, wondering what might be visible behind it. And that's how I began my first cycle of paintings. I called it 'Behind the Scenes'. Of course, I couldn't show them to anybody. I'd have been kicked out of the Academy. On the surface, there was always an impeccably realistic world, but underneath, behind the backdrop's cracked canvas, lurked something different, something mysterious or abstract. After pausing for a moment, she added, 'On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth' (Kundera 1984: 63).

The theme of paintings created using the method of double exposure returns in the novel as a sort of a leitmotif. Sabina sees various things in this dual way, among others, Tomáš, her lover. Tomáš is like the image of a cynical Don Juan, but through the crack in the canvas, she can see the melancholic Tristan. This double exposition, which places an understandable lie in the foreground and the incomprehensible truth in the potential backdrop, is used in the novel primarily as a metaphor for the totalitarian reality. The drop of red paint should be understood as a crack that calls to make it wider and see what is hidden underneath. The widening of the crack, or gaining a metaphorical distance from reality, embodied by steelworks, makes it possible to see the falsehood, the decorative nature and theatricality of this reality. However, the person needs to want to notice this crack. This can only be done by those who sometimes doubt the sense of being given to a person, those who – as Broch (1969) would have it – are tempted only by some other, new quality of the surrounding world. Those are the people who do not share the conviction that they have found themselves in the most beautiful of worlds. The others – those who do not seek the cracks in reality – express a categorical agreement with being, believing unwaveringly that the world is good and was created well. It is in this context that the famous definition of kitsch was formulated by Kundera:

Behind all the European faiths, religious and political, we find the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good, and that we are therefore entitled to multiply. Let us call this basic faith a categorical agreement with being. (...) It follows, then, that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch. (...) Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence (Kundera 1984: 248).

The biggest problem for Sabina (who is the reader's guide to the world of kitsch presented in the novel) is not so much the ugliness of the communist world, as the mask of beauty it puts on. French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard (1988), wrote that a mask is a kind of an arrested dream. The communist kitsch gives this dream some characteristics of a nightmare. That is how Kundera himself saw it. In another part of the novel we find a description of Tereza's dream: A group of smiling and singing naked women walking around a pool, with a man, sitting in a basket hanging over the pool, shooting at anyone who stops singing. With every corpse that falls into the pool, others laugh and their smiles widen. Kundera refers to this dream numerous times, in different dimensions, to finally state:

The feeling Soviet kitsch evoked in Sabina strikes me as very much like the horror Tereza experienced in her dream of being marched around a swimming pool with a group of naked women and forced to sing cheerful songs with them while corpses floated just below the surface of the pool. Tereza could not address a single question, a single word, to any of the women; the only response she would have got was the next stanza of the current song. She could not even give any of them a secret wink; they would immediately have pointed her out to the man standing in the basket above the pool, and he would have shot her dead. Tereza's dream reveals the true function of kitsch: kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death (Kundera 1984: 253).

The analogy between Tereza's dream and the image of the May Day parade, which in the author's opinion serves as a model of communist kitsch, cannot be disregarded. The crowd dressed in white, red and blue shirts, small marching bands playing music, lips stretched in a feigned or truly

enthusiastic smile – all this, according to Kundera, is a great manifestation of agreement, but not for the communism at all. The novel reads:

The unwritten, unsung motto of the parade was not ‘Long live Communism!’ but ‘Long live life!’ The power and cunning of Communist politics lay in the fact that it appropriated this slogan. For it was this idiotic tautology (‘Long live life!’) which attracted people indifferent to the theses of Communism to the Communist parade (Kundera 1984: 249).

Thus, kitsch appears to be a way of encoding the reality – some specific, binding total message. It has its sender (the communist authorities) and recipient (the society), existing in a superior-subordinate relationship. Kitsch, giving a false sense of security through ritualism and repetition, is actually a tool of control. Kundera even writes about the kitsch inquisition, because only constant and pedantic care about its purity can guarantee total kitsch durability. Every display of individualism (because it is like spitting in the face of smiling brotherhood), doubts (there is no point in asking questions, if the answers are fixed in advance), irony (because everything here must be taken with deadly seriousness) and anything that undermines the holy decree of ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Kundera 1984: 252) is eliminated from social life in a more or less brutal manner. In this sense, kitsch undoubtedly fulfils a similar function as the Orwellian Newspeak. Like Newspeak, kitsch is intentional. It is not created by chance, but with the intention of making ‘something into something else’ – beautiful, touching, sublime. Sabina, enchanted with New York, even formulates a thesis that beauty, and thus real art, is born by accident, as if by mistake. On the other hand, kitsch consciously makes things beautiful and sublime. It makes them so not for the chosen ones, but for everyone. The idea of universality is also indispensable in the construction of kitsch (both in relation to the range and universality of symbols, which it appropriates). Kundera emphasizes that in the land of kitsch there is a dictatorship of the heart, not of reason, and defines the symbolic moment of its birth – tears.

The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch (Kundera 1984: 251).

The protagonists of the novel try to escape from reality. Tereza and Tomáš run away to the countryside (after Tomáš is socially degraded from being a surgeon to working as a window washer). Sabina betrays her successive 'little stabilizations', fleeing farther and farther to the west, through Switzerland, Paris, all the way to America (betrayal is for her a liberating withdrawal from the ranks, a journey into the unknown, freedom). Franz discovers his ridiculousness as a member of an elite peace corps made up of Western European intellectuals who, in a 'Great March' ridiculed by Kundera, travels to Cambodia in a fervent protest against the war.

One can, however, decode the reality of kitsch. The same intention and consciousness that bring it to life can end its life. 'When we realize that kitsch is a lie,' writes Kundera, 'it ceases to be kitsch'. As another expert on the subject, Abraham Moles (1978), emphasized: 'No one can be stuck in kitsch being aware of it'. For Kundera (1984: 256), however, the most important thing is that at the moment of a peculiar unmasking, disclosure, kitsch 'loses its authoritarian power and becomes as moving as any other human weakness'. Thus, kitsch is above all an existential category. It is part of human fate, we carry its potential through the presence of all 'soft spots' of our consciousness – unsatisfied desires, needs, dreams, fears, secret loves and passions. As Maria Poprzęcka (1998: 288) rightly points out, Kundera's 'total kitsch' no longer has much in common with art. The researcher states that:

If [kitsch] refers to culture, it is only because of its all-encompassing, total character. This 'German word, which penetrated all languages', with all the uncertainties, concerned mainly low, popular levels of artistic production. Now, by extending its scope immeasurably, it has also lost its original reference subject.

Rather, Kundera continues Broch's thought on kitsch as a system immanent in reality and in every human being. He sees it both in the great totalitarian regimes and on the other side of the barricade – in the so-called Great March. He points out its various types, determined by what is the great idea, the basis of existence, to which categorical consent is expressed. There

are, therefore, various kitsches: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, communist, fascist, democratic, feminist (Kundera 1984: 257).

The question is whether the protagonists of the *Unbearable Lightness of Being* finally manage to save their own lives, to protect them from being entangled in kitsch. However, since the whole novel is basically one great existential experimental laboratory, perhaps the question is simply wrongly formulated. Perhaps we should ask not 'if', but 'to what extent' they manage to save their lives. The answer would then be: 'As much as possible'. The idyll with a dog, which Tomáš and Tereza build around them in a distant Czech village, bears all the signs of kitsch, but the protagonists finally find peace. The crowning achievement of their turbulent relationship, just before the tragic accident, is their mature and conscious love. Sabina flees, wiping out all the traces behind her and renounces her Czechhood. The last thing we find out about her is that she wants to die under the sign of lightness. Her ashes are to be scattered in the wind. Franz – a dreamer who in the novel seems to be the least aware of his entanglement in a reality contaminated with kitsch, longing for a life of great risk, courage, danger and death – finally sees the absurdity of his ideas. Before he accidentally dies in a senseless peace mission to Cambodia, calculated for cheap effect, he parts with his wife and finds some kind of happiness at the side of a young glass-wearing student. The protagonists did what they could, within the limits of their, in fact, very limited possibilities. However, they did not manage to escape so cleanly. Kitsch seized them in a moment when they no longer had any opportunity to defend themselves. Their moment of transition to non-being takes place to its accompaniment. It is as if between being and oblivion, there was some kind of narrowing, which strips man from all the baggage of uncommonness and uniqueness. And this is the proper, bitter and sad epilogue of the whole novel. Kundera sums up:

What remains of the dying population of Cambodia? One large photograph of an American actress holding an Asian child in her arms. What remains of Tomáš? An inscription reading HE WANTED THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH. What remains of Beethoven? A frown, an improbable mane, and a sombre voice intoning 'Es muss sein!' What remains of Franz? An inscription reading A RETURN AFTER LONG WANDERINGS. And so on, and so forth. Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion (Kundera 1984: 208).

According to this interpretation, kitsch will be a peculiar equivalent of Gombrowicz's 'mug', that is, an imposed, unwanted form that determines our lives. Both kitsch and 'mug' are non-negotiable. This strong and spectacular chord ending the reflections on kitsch aroused anxiety in Kundera himself. In *The Art of the Novel* the author admitted:

In the course of writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I was a little uncomfortable at having made the word 'kitsch' one of the pillar-words of the novel. Indeed, even recently, the term was nearly unknown in France, or known only in a very impoverished sense. In the French version of Hermann Broch's celebrated essay, the word 'kitsch' is translated as 'junk art' (*art de pacotille*). A misinterpretation (Kundera 1988: 134).

So we are returning to the problem we started with – the problem of inadequate translation. From Czech to French, from novel to film. The Hollywood film adaptation of *Unbearable Lightness of Being* popularized both the book and the writer. It re-attributed the author to the work, so that he became in a way, the author of a single novel. Meanwhile, Kundera writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was a novelist who was already very experienced³. In the 1960s, his books enjoyed great popularity in the Czech Republic, especially *Žert* (*The Joke*), *Směšné lásky* (*Laughable Loves*) or *Život je jinde* (*Life Is Elsewhere*). *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was published for the first time in a French translation in 1984 in Paris. At that time, Kundera had been in exile for almost ten years. This book was not his first emigration novel. In 1978 *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*) was published in France, for which he was stripped of Czech citizenship. As a specialist in the field, Petr Bílek, points out, *The Book...* was the first attempt to reach the Western European intellectual reader. It received praise from several professors dealing with comparative literature. Thus, the response, compared to Kundera's earlier novels, was actually negligible.

Kundera's next novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, was planned as a bestseller – one consisting of three carefully selected ingredients. Kundera

³ This part of the paper owes much to Petr A. Bílek's deliberations recorded as part of the 'Mluvicí hlavy FUK' project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-z7fO04h4Ws> [accessed: 16.02.2019].

made the first and main element a love story. It accounts for approximately 75% of the total novel. It is the story of a couple which becomes a triangle, then a quadrilateral and finally two couples. The story of Tereza and Tomáš is told in two voices. Love, saturated with both sophisticated and unsophisticated eroticism applied in philosophical diction, is shown once from a female, once from a male perspective. The chapter on Tereza is titled *Soul and Body*, Tomáš – *Lightness and Weight*. This is how Kundera defines the main antinomies that trouble the protagonists. The relationship is based on Tereza's faithfulness and Tomáš's unfaithfulness. Tereza dismisses and evokes the 'crew of her soul from the deck of her body' time and again (Kundera 1984: 60), Tomáš would like to love Tereza without being disturbed by the aggressive stupidity of sex (Kundera 1984: 237). We learn that metaphors are dangerous, because love can be born from a single metaphor (Kundera 1984: 11). This is how the love between Tereza and Tomáš was born (Tomáš sees in Tereza a child who was abandoned by someone at the edge of his bedroom – like a little Moses [Kundera 1984: 11]). At the end of the novel, we firmly believe that 'what happens during the moment when love is born: the woman cannot resist the voice calling forth her terrified soul; the man cannot resist the woman whose soul thus responds to his voice' (Kundera 1984: 160). The love experienced by Tereza, Tomáš, Sabina and Franz is also enriched with an additional romance context. Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* appears in the novel as an intertextual evocation. The Russian author's novel, read by Tereza, is at the same time a sign of her belonging to a secret brotherhood of readers. Tereza carries it with her when she meets Tomáš for the first time. Kundera skillfully disturbed the black and white world of Tolstoy's romance (let us recall that in *Anna Karenina*, there is a couple of people who cheat – Anna and Vronsky – and an archetype of lovers – Kitty and Levin). The relations between Tereza and Tomáš, Tomáš and Sabina, and Sabina and Franz were stripped of the aura of unambiguity by Kundera. The weakness of the cuckolded Tereza is actually aggressive (Havel's 'power of the powerless' resounds in the background), and the cheating Tomáš is in fact a melancholic Tristan; Sabina's cheating is an expression of her individualism, and the cheating and cuckolded Franz is simply a dreamer.

The second building element of the best-selling novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are its political themes. According to Bilek, a certain encyclopedia of communism serves here as a backdrop to the story of love.

It was difficult to talk about the reality of the Warsaw Pact in the West. Each time such a story evoked the necessity of adding long and extensive footnotes, which only muddled the image of the presented situation. Making the Prague Spring of 1968 – the moment, when communism was supposed to be given a ‘human face’, which was ultimately terminated with a brutal normalization – the key point of the novel’s background made it possible to create a certain code of communism, a juxtaposition of keywords of the communist reality. The Western European reader did not have to check the facts in textbooks and encyclopedias. All the required knowledge was provided in a neat package with just enough information.

Finally, the third component – it was a novel for intellectuals, featuring considerations about kitsch, weight and lightness, about the idea of an eternal return, and about writing a novel lined with the teachings of Nietzsche and Parmenides. Philosophical passages were erudite enough to satisfy the egos of the intelligent reader reasonably well-versed in philosophy, while at the same time they are free of hermetic nomenclature, so as not to alienate those not in the know.

Does Kundera’s indignation (or even disgust) with the film adaptation of his novel gain new meaning and sense in this context? Perhaps *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Kaufman revealed certain existing subconsciousness of the novel? Maybe it was its mirror, like the one mentioned by Broch? Maybe this disappointment and indignation with the film were only a mask covering the anxiety of the author himself? Or maybe Kundera-writer, just like the protagonists of his novel, while exposed to kitsch, finds himself ‘trapped by reality’ and at best can only move away from kitsch – but just slightly. Make a crack. Nothing more.

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Summary

This paper deals with the Kundera's most popular novel as a passionate dialogue with kitsch. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is based on the antinomy of lightness and heaviness, as well as kitsch and individuality. The narrator treats his characters as the experimental self and confronts them with the reality created on the cross-scheme of the aforementioned keywords. Kundera interprets the phenomenon of kitsch as a tool to create a totalitarian reality and enslave human beings, but also as something, that can be recognized and domesticated, and then comprises an inalienable part of a human being and its relation to the world. The essay also deals with the Kundera's famous aversion to adapting his novels for film. He forbade any further film adaptations of his work, having disliked the way *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was adapted by Philip Kaufman in 1988.

Keywords: Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, kitsch, testament, lie, mask, the 'human face' of socialism