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Sarbani Banerjee

*Western University, sbaner3@uwo.ca*

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“I Don’t Think Therefore I am Not”—Milan Kundera’s Expeditions through a Brain-dead Czechoslovakia Haunted by Kitsch
by Sarbani Banerjee

In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (1999), Milan Kundera describes two types of laughter—the demonic and the angelic—and observes the dilemma of the latter. According to him, the demonic laughter, having at its core “a heroic skepticism that immunizes them to the hypocrisy of sentimentality” champions the natural human condition of non-sameness, thereby inhabiting a negative yet truthful character (Kimball n.p.). In opposition, what Kundera calls as “circle dancing”: “take two steps in place, one step forward, lift first one leg and then the other” is the rhetorical meaningless of repetitive actions and the lure of the mob that defines the angelic laughter. In its refusal of the artless human condition and “the dream of a paradise where distinctions vanish and all men are brothers” (Kimball), the post-1948 Communist occupation and horror of Stanilism had in effect rendered Czechoslovakia a hotbed of what 19th-century Europe had coined as kitsch. Kundera, who was officially stripped of jobs because of his acerbic writings, remarks that this was a period of collective lyrical delirium . . . People like to say: Revolution is beautiful, it is only the terror arising from it which is evil. But this is not true. The evil is already present in the beautiful, hell is already contained in the dream of paradise and if we wish to understand the essence of hell we must examine the essence of the paradise from which it originated. (Roth 96)

In Eva Le Grand’s reading, the “absolute denial of shit” refers to a heavenly state, as it overlaps God’s image with the ignominious, degrading mortal condition. In her words: “shit evacuates everything which makes humanity different from the image of a God wreathed in purity”(14). Thus, shit becomes the metaphorical gestation of kitsch. The protagonist of Kundera’s novel The Joke had jokingly written to his girlfriend, “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!,” and was rusticated from the university, deposed of the party membership and confined to the mines. Because a joke
in every community is the leeway where one’s distinctiveness can be most celebrated as well as the common mirror where a group sees its collective yet unique visage, to take away this self-reflective medium and to constitutionalize the enactment of humour become tantamount to the death of the creative divergence of a people under the menacing shadow of an all-engulfing kitsch.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera writes: “Kitsch has its source in the categorical agreement with being . . . What makes a leftist a leftist is not this or that theory but his ability to integrate any theory into the kitsch called the Grand March” (256-57). In another part of the novel, he follows this idea: “The identity of kitsch comes not from a political strategy but from images, metaphors, and vocabulary. It is therefore possible to break the habit and march against the interests of a Communist country. What is impossible, however, is to substitute one word for others” (261). Kitsch is that kind of automated meta-language and meta-practice that controls and crystallizes a group’s pathological responding quality through an inexorably extremist vice-grip, allowing no joke, no freelance article to dwell in a non-ideological middle-space between obsessive Communism and Trotskyism, collaboration and corrective barracks life, the status of a doctor and a window-washer. At the root of this atrocious gesture is then a high degree of defensive and xenophobic mechanism fearing betrayal of its most prized rhetoric—an attitude that functions alike for every bureaucratic undercover agent across the globe. Broch defines the immediate symptoms of kitsch as not only “poor taste” but “the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one’s own reflection” (Kundera 2000: 134). This intimates a ritualized process of self-legitimation through repetitive enforcement of a sham idea with the same capacity that a demagogue employs to convince his audience. The brunt of this viciousness, no doubt, first and foremost impairs the faculty and the class of intellect and intellectuals respectively. It is hence to perform one’s individuation, to fight one’s erasure on the face of an overwhelmingly anonymous crowd, that body and its animalistic instincts become so important for Kundera.

In *The Book of Laughter*, one character frustratingly recognizes that the number of orifices in human body are so limited that every individual almost copies another in her/his erotic life. Under such a realization, a radical breakthrough in terms of sexual experience can be the only promise for liberation—offering a kind of lightness that helps articulate one’s own free will against the perpetual oppression by a political and cultural sameness.

Kundera makes an excellent observation based on a clipping from the October 1993 *Nouvel Observateur*: to paraphrase him, of a list of two hundred and ten words that were given to the Leftists, when a poll was taken a few years ago, they had eighteen words in common that fascinated them. When the same survey was carried out in 1993, it had boiled down to three—“revolt,” “red,” and “nudity” (*Slowness*....
Thus, having to go on representing or defying the warped sign called Communism, the only way of reclaiming one’s human quotient is through nudity. The body’s magnitude as a respondent to the governmental apparatus is noted by Marjorie Rhine: “the individual body is a critical pressure point between an oppressive or imposing political system and all that is most private, most in need of being protected if any sense of individual integrity is to be retained” (231), and in Kundera’s own words: “a scene of physical love generates an extremely sharp light which suddenly reveals the essence of characters and sums up their life situation” (Roth 99).

In The Unbearable Lightness, as Rhine explains, Tereza’s physically conscious love for Tomas is proportional to her desire to escape her mother’s world of “vast concentration camp of bodies, one like the next, with souls invisible” (47). We understand how the body becomes the fulcrum of an individual’s existentiality in one of the most touching moments in Slowness, where the Czech scientist loses one of his false teeth in a brief dispute. Having previously lost his career and being left with the misconception of a sturdy body, which is no more than a “misshapen silhouette” of a physique that reminds him of the oppressive regime, his loss of a tooth means a second castration over and above the political assault.

The Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia was principally countered by the tactile body language of the cerebral masses, such that interplay between body and photography becomes momentous in the display culture of kitsch. The words ‘picture’ and ‘picturesque’ being very close, it is a cameraman’s eternal desire to capture something ‘live’ in its ‘pristine state.’ Yet, because the subject matter of the Soviet occupation had principally been macabre visions like war, death, mutilated bodies and destroyed artefacts, the wish to immortalize such moments is highly morbid. Further, an individual at a given time could as much be a manufacturer as a prey of kitsch because of the camera’s positioning and the body’s responsiveness towards it. This is because human anterior and posterior have completely different equations with the camera: while the former implies full-fledged exercise of one’s agency and the reduction of the camera into a mite of technology, in the latter, individual subjectivity is absolutely destroyed by a kind of helplessness and lack of knowledge, where in the absence of human facial language, the camera becomes a ruthless gargantuan apparatus of surveillance objectifying and swallowing up one’s entity. Taking pictures from behind imports the same pattern of violation as was perpetuated by the secret police while interrogating Tomas or seducing Tereza and tracking their every word and movement. The camera in these cases performs the watchdog’s role, disrupting what Kundera so appreciates about traditional liberal values: “respect for the individual, for his original thought, and for his inviolable private life” (Kimball). On the other hand, photography’s stunt effect and extracting of preset judgment from a given spatio-temporal framework is evoked in The Unbearable Lightness, where a parade initiated by an association of Leftist doctors is brought to a standstill following the death of the cameraman.

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who is blown up by the mines while capturing such a ‘magnanimous’ undertaking. Flanked by a film star and an artist in order to popularize the parade, the missionary group was actually staging its philanthropic ideals before the camera; to that effect, dissipation of the group had to be an inevitable upshot following the death of the ‘eye’ before which it was narcissistically enacting itself. Kundera pre-empts our current climate wherein to make oneself heard or felt in a war or protest is impossible without cameras. Kundera calls this as the latest human condition where to make oneself be heard or felt in a war or protest is impossible without cameras. It is, according to him, the dancer’s syndrome, which Grand defines as an “imagological pantomime” (125). Owing to this same desire, the journalist in Slowness, while chased by her cameraman friend, cannot resist donning herself in a spectacular white gown before attempting suicide. Similarly, Vincent fancies sodomizing his female friend before “a sizeable, anonymous audience,” thereby appealing to an exhibitionist sex where public gaze is the only catalyst to help extend the phallic erection. In encountering a fiasco that roots back to his “wilted wild strawberry-like” member lies the hopelessness of orgiastic ambitions devoid of a focussed lens. The camera thus becomes a mock-up of the uncontrived self, whose kitschy presence, be it in detaining the external appearance or the real persona, henceforth renders the body visible or invisible while marking it undyingly with added value.

All over their respective presence in the two novels The Unbearable Lightness and The Joke, Sabina, the heretical descendant of a puritan Czech lineage, and Ludvik Jahn, the communist and intellectual student, epitomize two spent individuals, who through their numerous sexual escapades have traded their bodies on a sacrificial scale to both disquiet and quieten the raucousness of Communist music, band, food, writing and thought. Their orgy without consolation is, as Kundera would say, “a nudity that represents nothing at all, neither freedom nor filth, a nudity divested of all meaning, nudity denuded” (Slowness 117). They symbolize Umberto Eco’s notion of postmodernist, post-avant-garde “exhaustion” that tears one apart between “furiously anti-traditional avant-garde and the emergence of the post-modern willingness to revisit the past” (276). The mass desertion of churches alongside the encroaching “ugly architecture” of America that Sabina despises is what Adorno calls “a realm of artificial imaginary,” whose key drive, as he explains, rests in “a desperate compulsion to escape from the abstract sameness of things by a kind of self-made and futile promesse du bonheur” (Călinescu 228). However, even in their choice not to buy this new fake drabness that guarantees compensation and breakaway from an earlier quotidian existence, Sabina and Ludvik’s counter-kitsch expression has the danger of becoming an extension of kitsch, thereby floundering in the maelstrom of a vicious circle. As Călinescu points out: “a reaction against the ‘terror’ of change and the meaninglessness of chronological time flowing from an unreal past into an equally unreal future” is but another way of conforming to kitsch (248). This is because a
rejoinder to the regime is still a reaction towards it and not completely oblivious of its working principle. In such a forceful gesture, the body becomes the medium for random experiment. The body that had initially been a receptacle for the Russian spy’s sadism goes on to become a site for Prague citizen’s own masochism. In its victory as well as defeat, in the meticulous procedure of anatomical detection by an overwhelming state-run idyll followed by rejection of such an idyll through fetish for erotica, it is the body that gets doubly affronted.

Against the brain-dead auto-responsive network propagated by communist Czechoslovakia, a body’s individual consciousness of temporality becomes a statement about its personal position with respect to the system. While speed implies perfunctory mannerisms that serve one’s short-lived material wants, slowness becomes the knotty condition that ruminates in a zone of inertia without essentially hoping to be extricated. Thus, in *The Joke*, the character of Zemanek, a one-time jingoistic supporter of Communism, moves ahead as if seated on a speed-machine that ensures slick fame, and lives on as an empty signifier into which any meaning may be situationally fitted; Ludvik, betrayed by the party, remains but only and solely a synecdoche of Communism. Ludvik would never be able to catch up with and avenge his perpetrator Zemanek, because by the time he gets a chance to do so, Zemanek would have progressed along with the Czechoslovakian history and entered into the phase of “next generation”:

Today we were a different Jahn and a different Zemanek, so that if I hit out now, years later, my blow would be completely incomprehensible, would thus attain a completely different, alien significance not intended by myself, and could be deflected in every conceivable direction, in a way I could not even control, let alone justify. (274)

For Ludvik, to reconcile and exonerate the past would therefore mean disowning the greatest ordeal that he has faced and the greatest love for Communist ideology that he has harnessed, and ‘slowness’ is his only way to reclaim self-consistency: “How was I to explain to him that I *needed* to hate him?” (258); “Then I realized how feeble it was to want to annul my own joke when throughout my life I was involved in a joke which was all-embracing, unfathomable and utterly irrevocable” (271). Slowness thus inscribes Ludvik’s only possible sense of belonging in the bosom of hatred.

From this aforesaid episode, Kundera’s understanding of speed as a marker of forced amnesia and a way of living in ‘here’ and ‘now’ without paying heed to the future can thus be seen as an irrevocable split-up between the corporeal theory and the psyche, causing the former to become a self-referential entity. The very restive character of this speed stands on the awareness of its hollow chase for the Epicurean dream, because hedonism, as Kundera puts it, “has a melancholy backdrop . . . the Achilles’ heel of hedonism is not that it is self-centred but that it is . . . hopelessly utopian: in fact, I doubt that

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the hedonist ideal could ever be achieved; I’m afraid the sort of life it advocates for us may not be compatible with human nature” (Slowness 7-8). Beneath the mask of hedonism, however, speed can also be a way to avert quality thinking, to forestall drawing a trajectory between what one did and who one is. For the post-1968 Communist party of Czechoslovakia, the only way of clearing their extensive violence was also the excuse of speed—that the politicians had done the deed first and then (apparently) pondered. In this highly emotionless and blank impulse, there is a strategic avoidance of productive wistfulness, which signifies lack of passion and thereby a philistine attitude, in Liisa Steinby’s words, something “which wants only orgasms but not the whole range of eroticism” (161). Greenberg shows how kitsch and speed draw their lifeblood from the same placenta: “Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same . . . Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time” (emphasis added, Greenberg 10).

While Tomas is also a transporter of speed, he is the quintessence of “Es muss sien” (German for “it must be”), who defies Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence and lives in ‘this right now,’ such that speed in his case is a concrete progress carrying the germ of novelty. Roger Kimball compares Tomas with Kierkegaard’s aesthete in Either/Or, whose attempt to establish “a compromise between fear and desire” confirms him in the capacity of “a connoisseur of what Kierkegaard called ‘the rotational method’” (Kimball). For the likes of Zemanek, speed is the veneer for their vibrating around the same end in order to prevent a head-on collision into nothingness, a motion that does not take one anywhere but that endlessly tries to deflect an avalanche into retrogression. Zemanek is the nationalized communism’s kitschy version of speed which means impunity from guilt; he lives full-fledgedly neither in the present nor in the past but paradoxically becomes timeless. In opposition, Tomas and Sabina, despite their pleasure-seeking series of deathwards betrayals, live through complete responsibility of “reconstructive dialogue with the old and the past” (Călinescu 276) by neither unconditionally dismissing nor approving any category but revisiting them with irony. Sabina, who loves light and unambiguous perception without falling for its two extreme borders—the total darkness and the blinding daze—who grants ‘prison,’ ‘occupation’ and ‘tanks’ their due malice without the slightest hint of drama or romance, is the perfect example of the avant-garde, by which Greenberg means “a superior consciousness of history” and a “new kind of criticism of society” (4). For both Tomas and Sabina, life has an unrepeatable spirit that does not abide by the ‘given’ and instead shapes its own increment thrust by becoming a second original besides the available and accepted originals. They are products of the responsiveness “Einmal ist
“keitmal” or “what happens but once might as well not have happened at all” (Steinby 156), which creates them anew in every moment of history, positing them in the undying wonder of what Kundera calls “the old are the innocent children of their old age” (The Art 132). Their speed resonates with the freedom to choose, not the best because it cannot be known in advance, but in all serious intentions, which entails their escape from every form of enforcement. As Milan Jungmann points out, the betrayal by the Communist Party and its counterfeit socialist culture in Czechoslovakia had also caused former partisans like Kundera to assume drastic forgetfulness towards a past that had callously disabled their capacity of asking questions. In Kundera’s speedy transmutation by “subjecting to radical criticism everything that had heretofore made up the basic components of his ‘simple faith’” lay the counter-action towards the injury done to intellectualism by the bureaucracy (Jungmann 124).

Kostka, the physician who conceptualized Communism in terms of Christianity, has a great understanding of Ludvik’s overwrought inertia—because Ludvik has severed himself from the bond of Communism—yet because he has not enlisted as a faithful Christian, there is no way he can rid himself from the mire of hatred. The emptiness in Ludvik’s vengeance embodies dismissal of kitsch generated by both Communism and Christianity. What is more, these two conventionally hostile instances of kitsch become identical twins in amplifying Ludvik’s sense of indignation. His teaming up with or submitting before any one of them would have been as good as submitting before both. Kundera in his essays Testaments Betrayed explains how the ghost of our collective theological foundation in history makes it impossible to enunciate any communist idiom in severance from Christianity:

Over the course of the Modern era, nonbelief ceased to be defiant and provocative, and belief, for its part, lost its previous missionary or intolerant certainty. The shock of Stalinism played the decisive role in this evolution: in its effort to erase Christian memory altogether, it made brutally clear that all of us—believers and nonbelievers, blasphemers and worshipers—belong to the same culture, rooted in the Christian past, without which we would be mere shadows without substance, debaters without a vocabulary, spiritually stateless. (6)

Thus, even though Communism and Christianity formally do not acknowledge any kinship, the universal thread of kitsch passes through both of them. As such, in shunning one of these ideologies, Ludvik loses the sympathy of all straitjacket institutions and continues as an ostracized misanthrope.

The sacrosanct treatment of an allegedly atheist organization is realized in the deification of meta-communist icons by the ardent leftist Piotr Shelest: “I want you to know that Lenin

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and Stalin are still my exemplars . . . Let’s not mention them needlessly. You know, the Holy Scripture also says something like this: take not the Lord’s name in vain” (Prague Spring-Prague Fall 99). Such a dogmatic statement comes from the man who in his prime was notoriously politically xenophobic, which especially included his anti-Semitic diatribes, and who (as excerpts from his diary suggests) “considered Brezhnev a ‘weakling,’ a ‘milksop’ for not having made a real bloodbath in Czechoslovakia in 1968, similar to the one in Hungary in 1956” (Prague Spring 100). Viewing liberal and democratic socialist ideals as offensive initiatives by “abstract humanists” and “self-declared theoreticians,” a veteran like Shelest stands for the most reactionary mouthpiece of the party who would not let go of the platitudes about the “class nature” of communism. Broch explains how this echoes with the social anxieties and expectations of the institution of believers:

An open system, like the Christian one, is an ethical system: it provides man with the necessary directions for him to act as a man. The hints given by a closed system, on the other hand, are no more than simple rules of play, i.e. it transforms that part of human life which is in its control into a game that can no longer be valued as ethical, but only as aesthetic. (63)

Starting from music and artistic impression to political ideas, Communism had divided the people between those that followed the prescriptions and hence the authentic enthusiasts who would make it big under its rule, and the others. This second category literally sucked in everyone or thing—Bourgeois Right Wing supporters, the aristocratic class who were apparently apolitical, the Christian apostle, the heretical Leftist intellectuals and, as Tereza mentions in The Unbearable Lightness, the pre-regime constructions, public places, hoardings, birds, animals, et al. How shaky such an idyllic bubble must have been to feel threatened by the slightest cheek of the non-allies and thereby invest pointlessly on trivial niceties, is a commonly intriguing question.

At the administrative level, kitsch was manifested in the pompous attempt to commemorate the ideal that one wanted to achieve but also failed. Radoslav Selucky, a participator in Prague Spring remarks that this could be noticed in the most impractical decision taken by the obsolete apparatus of Czechoslovakia imitating the over-centralized planned economy of the Soviet even after so many crashes. One of the foremost features of kitsch is therefore never to be designed on the spur of the original moment and to always remain a vanity of hindsight. Harold Rosenberg writes: “Kitsch is art that follows established rules at a time when all rules in art are put into question by each artist” (266). Kundera has a more fitting example for this protracted stimulus: “Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. 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!” (Unbearable 251). In other words, kitsch is rife with a secondary, plastic, hence superficial connotation. It generates nostalgia and phantasmal craving for the unattainable utopic ‘pure,’ clinging on to some empty signifiers that tend to vulgarize instead of refining vision. Matei Călinescu explains this imitative quality of kitsch and its endorsement by market economy: “Value is measured directly by the spurious replicas or reproductions of objects whose original aesthetic meaning consisted, or should have consisted, in being unique and therefore inimitable” (226).

When a regime inflicts such compulsory emulative gestures on its populace, sex becomes the last resort in shelving one’s collapse into the world of clones—the last shock-absorber to resist a stupefying fallback into the complacency of the Grand March and “red revolution.” Sex as the domain of the personal tries to defend its individualized asset from the sheer public gaze to which the flattening and absolutist government subjects it. Conversely, as sex falls in line with the regime and becomes a show, therein lies the tragically unsexed idea of ‘heavenly,’ which Grand understands through the gross celebration of ‘normality’ occurring in the erotic paradise: “with the image of an all powerful Adam, able to raise his member without excitement—therefore without devilish female temptation, as one raises an arm or a leg” (15).

The misused values of communism under Soviet invasion and Clement Greenberg’s historical retrospection about kitsch as a “debased and academized simulacra” share an obvious parallelism. Post-1948, the Communist Party, corroborating with Stalin’s “Socialist content in national form,” had started to espouse folk art with open-arms, turning even a traditional marriage into an emblem of popular art. No creative conception could thrive in isolation from the movement. Against such engulfment of folk culture by the universal (and originally urban) culture of communist kitsch, Tomas and Tereza clearly go back to the parishes precisely to reclaim that pure space where neither the autocratic force nor the avant-garde vision hijacks one’s everyday. They take on the role to fill the void of the countryside, whose original inhabitants have been mostly inveigled by the lure of a cultural-diversion-of-some-sort without actually internalizing what could be called a “genuine culture” (Greenberg 10). In the case of Ludvik and Jaroslav, there is a sharp fall from this ‘romanticized local,’ who see the most hideous passing of the Rides of Kings in Brno. With drinks, a volatile mob and the actual king missing from the procession (“all I could see was actors, and on their faces masks pulled on to represent cretinous masculinity, arrogant ruthlessness and brutishness”: Ludvik 293), the scene is like an apparition haunted by the absence of its own body. The kitsch that Dorfles describes as “being vulgarly reproduced and known not for their real value but for a sentimental or technical substitute of these values” (19) is precisely the situation of Rides of Kings in the modern-day. Fattening itself on the corpse of a fully matured tradition, it signals an esoteric code no one has the patience

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to understand. As Ludvik says: “For many centuries young men have been riding forth in Moravian villages . . . with strange messages whose writ in some unknown language they pronounce with a moving loyalty and a lack of comprehension” (274).

Under such a regime, the impossibility to sieve music from noise, merriment from boisterous carousing, native folklores from their vulgarized modernizations becomes apparent. Thus, from ‘Our Ride’ that used to be a demonstration before the German officers to “the old, deserted, ousted king . . . without heirs” (The Joke 287), the party seems to have treaded a long, meretricious journey. Ludvik’s aversion for this Rides of Kings comprising motley costumes, painstaking officiousness and spontaneity and the hullabaloo of traffic and riders, plainly hint at the vague future of the party. A similar tyrannical jollity of Russian occupation in Czechoslovakia can also be recognized in Sabina’s repugnant encounter with music in a steelworks construction site: “Music roared out of loudspeakers on the site from five in the morning to nine at night. She felt like crying, but the music was cheerful, and there was nowhere to hide, not in the latrine or under the bedclothes: everything was in the range of the speakers” (Unbearable Lightness 93). In order to cover its spurious and duplicate merit, kitsch here invigorates itself with the power of immediacy, thus making a populace shed its objective distance and revel in the common weakness of myopia. This is then the opposite of the avant-garde Greenberg defines as a poetry or art for its own sake. In its vigorous baffling of the sense organs and shouting with “the veins standing out on their necks” (The Joke 259), kitsch, unlike the avant-garde, balances its ephemeral life on the edge of the challenge to convince the world of the ‘Cause’ of its existence.

While pointing out that kitsch by its hyperbolic mechanism had haunted Czechoslovakia for quite some time with the mirage of Communism, Kundera also sees it as the necessary, albeit fake glue that holds together the promise of human attachments and the sanity of a surrogate home. In Unbearable Lightness, the seeming lightness in leading a window-cleaner’s life that Tomas thinks as a holiday from his own, later looms as “a long-lasting preoccupation with merely weightless things” (160), such that the maximum length of this holiday can only be two years. It is the exact counterpart of the lightness that saves Sabina’s free fall into a goal-less weightless void, after she hoodwinks her parents, husband, country and love. While the classic ideal of romanticism and thereby the “heaviness” the author ascribes to Tereza is indeed seated on aesthetic lies and a “duplicate” way of living, he also makes us wonder: could this idyllic facet in her kitsch cut into Tomas’ erotically annulled body and make it bluntly look into the irreparable source of its crisis? As Steinby puts it, “Despite its absolute freedom and ‘nonnecessity,’ by giving life the required weight love can make it bearable to someone who otherwise would be condemned to the lightness of existence” (160).

Even as Kimball criticizes Kundera for calling his novels primarily love stories in which political contents serve as “incidental
embellishment or atmosphere,” (Kimball) he misses out on the author’s resistance against the diminution of a Czech layperson to a singular political kitsch of the collective. Celebrating interpersonal relationships through oddities of love and hate at the era of Soviet occupation becomes a resurrection of the mundane that in its eternal pose of self-defence against the State had either ceased to be or at its best remained a negation of the public version of communism. As Misurella reflects, such relationships do not replicate Dante’s elevated notions of Sin and body, but help “in determining what is essentially human, what is essentially self” (55). In a way, Kundera tells us that too much lightness, intellectual or otherwise, like too much ersatz living, can after all become unbearable. His avant-garde characters best know why.

University of Western Ontario
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