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## **The Unbearable Lightness of Being - a philosophical exploration**

*A character is not born of a  
mother's womb, but of a metaphor  
(Milan Kundera)*

### **Abstract**

*The article consists of an analysis of the film *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Phillip Kaufman based on Milan Kundera's novel. I utilise the strategy of intertextuality while warning against the tendency to compare a film and a novel on the wrong assumption that they are texts of the same kind. By asking specific questions about the film version of Kundera's novel I demonstrate the creative manner in which the medium of the film produces meaning through images.*

### **1. Introduction**

By way of introduction I draw your attention to the following nine characteristics of the imagination: production of images (staying close to the perceptual world), invention of meaning (images are spoken before being seen), creation of structure (joy in discovering structures which are not immediately obvious), integration of the faculties of the mind (sensation, intellect, intuition, emotion, and will), introduction of split reference (a wolf is a wolf and not a wolf at the same time), re-discovery of experience ("the red of garden roses is not only decisive but dramatic, like suddenly spilt blood"), exploration of the psyche (the importance of *poiésis*, image-making-ness, for the development of the personality), improvisation of homecoming (unlocking the real towards a domain of possibilities), and interpretation of signs (we are stories because we tell stories).

The film *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* could be analysed in terms of these characteristics.

- Production of images: a film is a perceptual medium *par excellence*.
- Invention of meaning: meaning is invented in accordance with the language of the film, the grammar of images, the integrated way in which the images follow one another in time.

- \* Creation of structure: there are many relationships between the images in the film which are not immediately obvious and the recognition of which intensifies the joy of the experience.
- \* Integration of faculties: the apprehension of the succession of the images involves all five faculties, namely sensation, intellect, intuition, emotion, and will, while the imagination integrates these functions of the mind and intensifies one's involvement.
- \* Introduction of split reference: the little pig is a little pig and not a little pig at the same time.
- \* Re-discovery of experience: the dramatic relationships between characters in Czechoslovakia can be re-discovered in dramatic relationships in our own lives in South Africa.
- \* Exploration of the psyche: the images in the film can not only be seen as explorations of the psyches of the characters, but also as illuminating the lives of the viewers, in depth.
- \* Improvisation of homecoming: the extent to which the main characters improvise new possibilities in the real world of oppression.
- \* Interpretation of signs: since we are constituted by stories the quality of this story should be ascertained.

I do not, however, intend analysing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in terms of these nine aspects of the imagination. I propose that we view the film as an intertextual event and explore the meanings of the signs on the basis of questions about specific issues.

## 2. What is the meaning of the term *intertextuality*?

The term *text* is derived from the Latin word *texere* (to weave) which enables us to say that a text has to do with a weaving of signs; it consists of the interwovenness of signs. To this one can add that a text is a set of signs available for interpretation. A sign can be defined as that to which meaning is to be attached, something which invites being placed in a context for the purpose of interpretation. A sign consists of a signifier, a mark or a sound, and a signified, the meaning attached to the mark and the sound. There is an important tension between signifier and signified which makes the interpretation of signs a difficult and exciting adventure.

A text usually refers to the interwovenness of signs in a book but it can also apply to any set of signs, for example, a film, the life of a person, a meeting, a political situation, history, etc.

Intertextuality refers, firstly, to the interrelationship between signs in various books and, secondly, to the interwovenness of signs in whatever texts available to us. This leads to an immense enrichment of the act of understanding since the sign in a book as text must be related to the signs in the writer as text, the reader as text, the context as text, and history as text.

Modern literary theory has provided us with the following views of the nature of a text: the text as *document* of the mind of the writer; the text as *monument* - a reference to an assumed autonomy of the text; the text as *score* which allows for a variety of interpretations; the text as *site of struggle*, a formulation which highlights the ideological and political dimension of understanding; and the text as *intertextual event*, which emphasises the interwovenness of signs taken from various areas. One can, of course, make use of all these methods, but I prefer the strategy which views the text as intertextual event, since it can accommodate the other views and it demonstrates a sensitivity for the open-endedness of understanding.

With regard to the areas of applicability, one can state that it applies to all areas of human understanding. This includes space and time, the universe and history, the psyche (the conscious and the unconscious) and all the products of human creativity. Written texts are usually taken as prime examples of textuality and intertextuality. My proposal is that we apply it to all areas of human understanding: everything can be seen in terms of signs. In the context of this article I concentrate on myth, fairy tale, novel and film. I maintain, furthermore, that by exploring the intertextuality of a text, one discovers one's life as a text – an intertextual event – and that this is an enriching experience.

### 3. How should one approach the difference between Kundera's novel and Kaufman's film?

One approach is to describe the difference in terms of the usual distinction between the complexity of the novel and the simplified version of the novel transcribed into a film-script. In this context it makes little sense to say that the book, of course, was 'much better' than the film, since, although one is indeed comparing two texts, they are not texts of the same kind. Any evaluative comparison must keep this in mind.

One must also remember that a director, by choosing a certain locale and particular actors is inevitably directing the imagination of the viewer of the film in a certain direction. This inevitable choice which entails concretisation and particularisation highlights one kind of difference between depictions in novel and film.

The difference between a novel and a film is especially clear when one compares a modernist filmic presentation of a post-modernist novel. One of the main characteristics of a post-modernist novel is the way in which textual commentary is continually introduced to undermine fixed interpretations. With regard to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as a post-modernist novel, which makes use of the strategy of textual commentary, Gräbe (1989a:23) remarks: "Since possible interpretations are continuously undercut through the text's preoccupation with its productive process, reading really becomes a demanding process in such texts." A filmic adaptation which, inevitably does not only have to make a choice from the rich texture of the novel's material, but which omits the textual commentary, runs the risk of being criticised for being reductionist.

This problem can, of course, be solved by introducing the post-modernist strategy of textual commentary in the film medium itself. In the case of Kaufman's film *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* this strategy was not followed.

Gräbe (1989a:23-24) summarises this important difference between post-modernist use of self-reflexivity and the modernist method of story-telling as follows:

That such deliberate exploitation of self-reflexivity is indeed essential to the meaning behind the attempted stories, is illustrated by the entirely different reading of Kundera's text presented in the selective filmic depiction of the story without the textual commentary. Despite relaying the possible political statement through a depiction of erotic relationships, the film still presents an unsophisticated focalization of the events resulting, on the one hand, in a romanticised version of personal relationships (not to say a commercialized exploitation of eroticism) and lending itself, on the other hand, to a propagandistic depiction of the Russian invasion into Czechoslovakia. Since this is a reading which exploits the devastating effects of the historical events on the personal lives of the protagonists without taking cognizance of the way in which metacommentary continually deconstructs such effects by laying bare the artifice of the writing process, it is a reading which does not do justice to the penetrating scrutiny to which both fictional and historical events are subjected, and which therefore results in a reductionist and distorted presentation of the possible meanings of the text.

Gräbe (1989b:47-48) goes one step further in describing the difference in terms of truth and untruth. She points out that the metacommentary "dramatises the danger of attempting definitive statements on 'reality'". The novel introduces questions rather than explanation while the film opts for definitive statement. She quotes Kundera (1987:254) as saying: "A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies behind it ... on the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth showing through." This idea is then applied by Gräbe to the difference between novel and film as follows: Postmodernist fiction demonstrates "a humble awareness of the limitations of attempting to express through fictional writing the 'unintelligible truth', which may be so easily transformed into a (visual) 'intelligible lie', as the reductive filmic representation of the text only too clearly demonstrates".

In spite of the useful insights formulated by Gräbe this kind of statement remains controversial and does not pay enough attention to the crucial difference between the ways of presentation in novels as texts and films as texts. Related to this is the fact that she does not take into account that the film script was written by Kaufman and Jean-Claude Carrière in co-operation with Kundera. Fuller (1988) provides some useful information in this connection. For example, he informs us that the director followed Kundera's advice to use Janacek's piano quartets. Kaufman states:

Ironically, because we eliminated the narrator, what the narrator says had to find its way back into the film. Sometimes it was spoken by the characters. Through Janacek's music, however, you get a sense of narrative line - of motifs and themes repeated. (Quoted by Fuller, 1988:40)

Furthermore one has to keep in mind that the repetition of musical themes, in combination with the visual recurrence of motifs and scenes, reinforce Kundera's play with the myth of the eternal return.

In my analysis I argue that a film should be interpreted as a text – a set of signs – which merits understanding in terms of the grammar of its own language. In exploring the language of a film one discovers the close relationship between *what* and *how*, between the question '*what* do images mean?' and the question '*how* do images mean?' Both the novel and the film script are intertextually related to the film as text but should not be given a privileged position with regard to the understanding and the evaluation of the film.

#### 4. What is the point of analysing a film?

One answer to this question consists in pointing out what it means to say that a film is an intertextual event. In my analysis I try to show what intertextuality entails and to demon-

strate the close relationship between *what* a sign means and *how* a sign means. A film is a text which consists of a variety of signs which are related to one another and to signs and texts outside the film. By means of analysis it is brought to one's attention how simple images resonate beyond themselves. One aspect of the interwovenness of signs in the case of a film is the manner in which sight, sound and meaning are integrated. A film does not only consist of synchronicity of sight and sound, but, more importantly, it consists of the congruence of sight, sound and meaning. One experiences how meaning is created in time by means of the manner in which images follow one another.

Another reason for the importance of analysis is the fact that it enables one to discover to what extent all experience is already interpretation. This refers to experience in general and to the experience of a film. To think that only philosophers are (unnecessarily) concerned about interpreting films, but that the so-called ordinary viewer has a pure experience and therefore a pure understanding of the meaning of the film as it is, is an illusion. All experience already entails an interpretation and to become conscious of this, by means of a second reflection, is to enrich one's experience, for example, by comparing various interpretations and arguing in favour of one's own.

#### **5. What is the meaning of the title?**

The term *being* used in the title refers, at least, to human existence and its problematic nature. The lightness of being refers to the playfulness with which Tomas and Sabina operate on the surface of human existence. And what is more effective than the game of sex to illustrate this playfulness, this discontinuity between episodes, this escape from the depth of life which entails continuity – the linking of episodes to one another and taking responsibility for one's actions? This type of life is unbearable for a person who takes history seriously and who respects the continuity of life which entails both consciousness and conscience.

These remarks prepare us for one of the main tensions present in the film, namely, the tension between discontinuity and continuity as illustrated in the lives of Tomas and Tereza. Tomas succeeds in celebrating the lightness of being while Tereza experiences this lightness as unbearable, since she represents the weight of continuity and responsibility.

#### **6. What is the first image we see?**

It is the image of a painted surface, light-brown in colour, with a dark patch at the bottom right-hand corner. There is a mysterious quality to it since there are no clues enabling us to read the signs. I would suggest that we interpret the signs in terms of a surface that has to be opened in order to obtain entry into the film but, since we only have a dark blotch at the bottom right-hand corner where we could expect a handle to open it with, there is no entry and the mystery remains. Except of course if we improvise a handle, discover a key, start asking questions – a strategy which I have decided to use.

#### **7. What are the first words we hear?**

"Take off your clothes". These are words interpreted primarily in erotic terms by the viewer, but they have a resonance well beyond the immediate sexual context.

These words introduce us to a central theme of the film, namely, the problem of sight and insight, seeing with the eye of the body and seeing with the eye of the mind. How does one look at things and what does one really see? Is it not possible that what we see depends on how one looks?

Tomas looks at the body, the naked body. He even penetrates the body with an operating knife as well as with the knife of his own body, but to no avail. He does not detect the soul. Therefore the series of penetrations must continue. This theme of seeing is repeated in various images, for example, windows (towards the end of the film Tomas even washes windows to earn a living), mirrors, the eye of the camera, curtains being drawn and opened, and the use of the surgeon's knife.

This search for the soul of a person is expressed by the narrator on behalf of Tomas as follows:

The individual 'I' ... His passion for surgery and his passion for women came together. Even with his mistresses, he could never quite put down the imaginary scalpel. Since he longed to take possession of something deep inside them, he needed to slit them open ... So it was a desire not for pleasure (the pleasure came as an extra, a bonus) but for possession of the world (slitting open the outstretched body of the world with his scalpel) that sent him in pursuit of women. (Kundera, 1987:199-200)

#### 8. Where does Tomas see Tereza for the first time?

In the only place which makes sense if one views Tereza as representing the unconscious, namely, in the water – the symbol of the unconscious. While he observes the swimmingpool at the spa, where he was summoned to perform an operation, Tereza catches his attention by diving into the water with the result that the movement of the water – the unconscious – disturbs the chess game played by baldheaded men and symbolising rationality *par excellence*. This episode is also a symbol of their relationship and anticipates the way in which her dreams – the language of the unconscious – will decisively disturb the conscious life of Tomas.

#### 9. How should one interpret the names of the main characters?

The name of Tomas echoes the scepticism of the biblical character. On the basis of the principle that 'seeing is believing' he sets his eyes on empirical evidence. During a moment of compassion, however, he kisses the hands of Tereza when told one morning about a dream in which her hands were wounded. When the biblical Tomas sees the marks of the wounds in the hands of Jesus he recognises what is really happening. In the case of Tomas in the film, however, this recognition has only a very limited effect on his way of life.

There are various examples of Tomas as a character of doubt. I have mentioned his inability to make up his mind concerning the choice between his life-style of erotic friendships and compassion for Tereza, between desiring all and loving one. Tomas asks himself: Why should one have to choose? "Attaching love to sex is one of the most bizarre ideas the Creator ever had" (Kundera, 1987:237).

This indecision is closely linked to the struggle to come to a decision regarding the problem of necessity and chance. He wants to know whether his love story exemplifies "Es muss

sein" (It must be so) or "Es könnte auch anders sein" (It could just as well be otherwise).

Other examples of his propensity to doubt concern the publication and the retraction of his article on Oedipus, and the signing of an anti-government petition.

The name of Tereza is first and foremost a reference to Terezin, a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. This gives a certain weight to her character, for she represents the conscience of Europe, the continuity of history, from which Tomas, the protagonist of discontinuity, wants to divorce himself. Her dreams, which consist mainly of nightmares, bear this out. They illustrate the depth of suffering involved when one experiences the weight of being. According to Kundera: "... the heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become".

The name Tereza also has an intertextual link to Saint Tereza, a mystic, who represents the unification of spirit and nature, soul and body, love and sex. One who has this approach to life will experience the life-style of Tomas as unbearable.

One can also detect traces of Teiresias, the blind Greek prophet, who by means of his inner eye penetrates much deeper than the outer eye is capable of doing. In one of her dreams Tereza is buried alive and is visited by Tomas once a week. When he tries to wipe the dirt from her eyes she says: "I can't see anyway. I have holes instead of eyes" (Kundera, 1987:22). In her dreams – the eyes of the unconscious – Tereza sees the world in such a way that it not only introduces her to the weight of being and disturbs her in a profound way, but it also reaches out to the life of Tomas. As Teiresias revealed to Oedipus that he is guilty, so Tereza reveals through her dreams that Tomas is Oedipus.

The names given to the little pig and the dog also throw some light on the characters of Tomas and Tereza. The name of the little pig is Mephisto and it is appropriate that he disrupts the marriage ceremony. This episode reminds the Faustian Tomas of his demonic contract in committing his soul to the lightness of being. The little pig brings to his (and our) attention that Tomas is unfaithful to the demonic life-style of 'erotic friendships' by committing himself to a marriage which entails the weight of continuity and responsibility.

The name of the little dog Tereza receives as present is Karenin, a reference to the book she reads, namely, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. This name becomes a metaphor for fidelity and illustrates Tereza's own faithfulness towards Tomas in spite of his erotic friendships. Because she is faithful there is a continuity in their relationship. The death of Karenin towards the end of the film is an opportunity for Tomas to realise the importance of fidelity and to take the place of Karenin by remaining faithful to Tereza.

## 10. Which books do the main characters read?

Tereza reads *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy's novel about a woman who leaves her husband but who is let down by her lover. Tereza has a similar experience in leaving her mother's home in order to discover her own individuality in the presence of Tomas who, unfortunately, denies her individuality by equating her body with the bodies of his mistresses. In the family set-up she was ashamed of her body because her soul was not respected. According to the narrator:

She had a longing to be a body unlike other bodies, to find that the surface of her face reflected the crew of the soul charging up from below ... She had come to Tomas to escape her mother's world, a world where all bodies were equal. She had come to him to make her body unique, irreplaceable. But he, too, had drawn an equal sign between her and the rest of them. He had sent her back into the world she tried to escape. (Kundera, 1987:47,58)

Tereza also refers to life as a concentration camp because of a lack of individuality.

Tomas reads Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The first time that we are introduced to the intertext of the Oedipus myth is the scene in which Tomas wakes in the morning and discovers to his amazement that – contrary to his strict rule of not remaining in the same bed with a woman after love-making – Tereza is not only in bed with him but is actually holding his hand. In order not to wake her, he places a copy of *Oedipus Rex* in her hand as substitute for his hand.

This is a sign which clearly suggests that Tomas is in one way or another linked to Oedipus. At this stage of the film it is not clear what the link is. But gradually it is revealed that Tomas uses the Oedipus myth to criticise the Russian occupation of his country. The Russians are raping Prague but they lack the morality of Oedipus to admit their guilt and follow his example by putting out their eyes.

The point of the story, however, is not the Oedipus-link with the Russians but the Oedipus-link with Tomas. Agreed, the Russians and the Czech collaborators are destroying Prague, but Tomas is destroying Tereza. He is the cause of her suffering and nightmares. And similar to the Russians he lacks the courage of Oedipus to put out his eyes.

This link between Tomas and the Russians and their collaborators is depicted in the café scene in which he and his friends discuss his Oedipus interpretation and watch the faces of the oppressors also seated in the café to detect whether one can actually gather from the expression on their faces that they are scoundrels. After they have decided that this is indeed the case, they turn to Tomas to judge whether his face reveals that he too is a scoundrel. It is suggested that the reason why one cannot see it in his face, is because it is hidden in his brain. The question is asked whether he can be viewed as innocent in case it is so deeply hidden. The answer is: no, not innocent, unaware perhaps. We are then left with the further question: what has to happen for Tomas to realize that he, too, is guilty?

There is also a different use made of the Oedipus myth in the meditations of Tomas on the chance happening of meeting Tereza. In a reference to the fact that Oedipus was an abandoned child whose life took on tragic proportions, Tomas talks of his acceptance of Tereza in terms of "the rescue of an abandoned child" (Kundera, 1987:11). Except for the metaphor of the abandoned child it is not clear, however, to what extent the myth can be applied to Tereza.

## 11. Should the emphasis on the number six be taken seriously?

During the first meeting between Tomas and Tereza in the bar at the village spa he shows her his room-key. When she sees the number six on it, she comments: "That's odd. You're in room six and my shift ends at six." One of the themes of the novel is the problem of chance and necessity and to what extent one's life is decisively influenced by chance happenings. Tomas refers to Tereza as "the personification of absolute fortuity" and



enumerates the six chance happenings which brought them together:

... a complex neurological case *happened* to have been discovered at the hospital in Tereza's town; the chief surgeon of Tomas's hospital *happened* to be suffering from sciatica; Tomas *happened* to be given a room in the one where Tereza was employed, he *happened* to stop at the hotel restaurant; Tereza *happened* to be on duty, and *happened* to be serving Tomas's table. (Kundera, 1987:35)

The emphasis on the fact that her shift ends at six also suggests that life's journey ends at six. One is therefore not surprised when at the end of the story, before the fatal accident, the camera lingers for one moment at the door of their hotelroom to show us the number six. The chance meeting at the village spa developed into a bonding of a life-time.

If one assumes that number seven is the symbol of fulfilment, then the question can also be raised whether the characters ever achieve this state of mind since they consistently operate within the sphere of six. A further question would be whether the ideal of fulfilment is ever attainable given the inevitable contingency of life.

## 12. How should one interpret the character of Sabina?

By concentrating on the relationship between Tomas and Tereza one runs the risk of underestimating the role of Sabina. In both their lives she plays a decisive role.

Sabina is close to Tomas in the sense that she also represents the life-style of the lightness of being. The erotic games played by Sabina and Tomas in front of the mirror is an imaginative presentation of the notion that these two characters are mirror-images of one another. They both choose for discontinuity in life in which priority is given to the pursuit of pleasure on a strict individualist basis. She is perhaps more consistent than Tomas in following the code of lightness. She is restless in her movements from one male body, one room, one city, to the next. "I love leaving restaurants" she informs her new lover Franz and one should not be surprised that she leaves him. In the film this happens at the moment he informs her that he has decided to divorce his wife.

Franz, in his relationship to Sabina a protagonist of fidelity, made a mistake in thinking that he could win Sabina over by his ability to be faithful. "We must live in a glass house where there are no secrets" is the way he views their relationship. But, according to the narrator, "... what he did not know was that Sabina was charmed more by betrayal than by fidelity ... But what is betrayal? ... Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown" (Kundera, 1987:91).

Sabina leaves for Geneva after the arrival of the Russians in Prague and, unlike Tomas and Tereza, she never returns to the weight of history. She remains faithful to the lightness of being and after the death of Tomas she sadly comments: "He died as Tristan, not as Don Juan." He abandoned lightness in favour of weight.

## 13. What is the theme of the first scene involving Tomas and Sabina?

Both characters are introduced to us by means of images depicting intimacy in the sphere of the lightness of being. They are both in favour of discontinuity as the basic rule of the

game of sex. When asked whether he harbours a fear of women, Tomas replies that he has a fear of continuity and the obligations it implies.

Sabina describes the individualism of Tomas as follows: "You are the opposite of kitsch. In the world of kitsch you would be a monster." The opposition between art and kitsch is central in the life of Sabina. She equates it with the opposition between individuality and conformity. The life-style of conformity which dominates politics she describes in terms of a dehumanisation perpetrated by "The Grand March". In this world of conformity she and Tomas improvise an erotic game in an endeavour to create a space for individuality, freedom, art and beauty. She describes "The Grand March" in the following way:

Behind Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil and the image of that evil is a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison. (Kundera, 1987:100)

Kitsch is conformity and conformity is exemplified by "The Grand March".

We know, from a different source, namely Kundera's work *The Art of the Novel*, that Kundera also distinguishes between art and kitsch, individuality and conformity, and makes a choice in favour of the art of the novel as prime example of respect for the individual and as the treasure chest of original thought.

The *agelastes* (Rabelais's word for those who do not laugh), the non-thought of received ideas, and kitsch are one and the same, the three-headed enemy of the art born as the echo of God's laughter, the art that created the fascinating imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood. That imaginative realm of tolerance was born with modern Europe ... But we know that the world where the individual is respected (the imaginative world of the novel, and the real one of Europe) is fragile and perishable. (Quoted by Rorty, 1989:vi)

#### 14. What is the point of the long photographic session between Sabina and Tereza?

The nakedness of the bodies is functional. Tereza is pure soul and has a negative relationship to her body mainly because of her mother's crude way of not only talking about the body but also displaying it. When she leaves her mother's home she longs for someone to teach her respect for her own body. She expects Tomas to play this role, but on the contrary, it is Tomas who humiliates her by denying the uniqueness of her body.

In this context the photographic session plays a decisive role. At the beginning Tereza is the photographer, but later on they switch roles and then Sabina caresses Tereza's nude body with the eye of the camera, with her own eyes and with her hands. Contrary to her expectation this episode has a liberating effect on Tereza and she acquires a more positive relationship to her body.

Because Sabina relates to the body of Tereza in a manner different from Tomas's dominating style, she succeeds – in Tereza's way of speaking – to call forth her soul. In the case of Tomas the politics of sex amounted to a power relationship in which Tomas dominated. In the case of Sabina mild eroticism succeeds in unlocking the body of Tereza, which results in the integration of soul and body.

## 15. Why does sex function so prominently in the film?

One can approach this question from various angles. I propose that we view it in terms of the politics of sex. In the case of the relationship between Tomas and Sabina it is a sign of art in opposition to kitsch, individuality in opposition to conformity, taking a delight in the erotic game for the sake of eroticism, an enjoyment of the body as exemplified by the games they invent in front of the mirror. This is an activity which finds its fulfilment in itself and excludes any transcendent reference to notions such as love or "The Grand March". In one sense their sexual games are illustrations of an individual claim to a private sphere in opposition to a totalitarian regime.

In the case of Tomas and Tereza sex produces different signals. We should keep in mind that Tomas points an accusing finger at the Russians for destroying Europe while lacking the morality to accept their guilt and put out their own eyes. Tomas, however, destroys Tereza but also lacks the courage to admit guilt and blind himself. It is interesting to note in this context that the erotic sounds uttered by Tereza in some cases clearly signify pleasure *and* pain, joy *and* sorrow.

The politics of sex in their case represents a power-game played in the sphere of sex. Tomas appropriately describes the female body as a country which has to be conquered without the conquerer being obliged to ask the question of his responsibility regarding the female soul which is humiliated.

## 16. What meaning should one attach to water as a sign in the various water scenes?

Water is a symbol of the unconscious, of the source of life and of birth. When Tomas sees Tereza for the first time she is in the water in the swimmingpool. This is the right place for her to be, image-wise, if she is going to represent Tomas's unconscious. It also suggests the birth of a significant relationship. In the case of Tomas it entails a discovery of the difference between desiring all and loving one, between seeing a naked body and compassion – "the maximal capacity of affective imagination", between copulation and the desire for shared sleep, between sex and love, defined as "the occupation by another person of one's own poetic memory". (Kundera quoted by Doctorow, 1984:46.)

The second scene involving water also takes place in the swimming pool and represents the unconscious world of Tereza manifesting itself in her dreams. In this dream she watches, while swimming, how Tomas assesses the competence of various naked women and if they do not perform according to his wishes, he gets rid of them. In this scene water depicts the unconscious of Tereza filled with innumerable signs of suffering because of Tomas's lifestyle of unbearable lightness.

Water also plays an important role in a scene after Tereza has left Zürich because of the infidelity of Tomas. He reads her letter informing him that she is returning to Prague. The reason? "Life is too heavy, I am not strong enough for this lightness." He realises that he loves her with a compassion which differs from sexual attraction. This awareness of compassion is translated into the image of Tomas stepping into the water amongst the white swans. It is a sign that he accepts the challenge of the unconscious and is willing to commit himself to the weight of being. (Impressive is the way in which their re-unification is depicted, and the visual power of the erotic circle dance of their faces before they make bodily contact.)

A fourth water scene involves a humiliated Tereza after her failed sexual experiment in which she explored the erotic lightness of being as a possible life-style for herself. She meditates on the meaning of her life while standing on the river's edge. The wooden bench that flows past in the river becomes a sign of her taking cognisance of the course of her life commencing with their first discussion on the wooden bench at the spa.

Their relationship started with her sudden appearance in the water at the swimming pool and their lives also end in the context of water. The car accident takes place in the rain. This recurrence of water could be taken to mean that they return to the mystery of life from which they came – a mystery that Tomas would link with chance happenings. Each one had to become involved in his/her own process of individuation and each one needed the other to succeed in this task. Tomas was pure body and had to discover the soul. Tereza was pure soul and had to discover the body. Both of them had to discover that human existence entails both lightness and weight, both joy and sorrow.

### 17. Why do dreams play such an important role?

Dreams are important because they tell us something about the workings of the imagination in the domain of the unconscious and how it enables a person to cope with the problem of becoming a fully fledged human being. Of Tereza it is said:

She would dream three series of dreams in succession: the first was of cats going berserk ... the second was images of her execution ... the third was of her life after death, when humiliation turned into a never-ending state. (Kundera, 1987:58)

Tomas realises that her dreams are about death and that he is involved but refuses to change his life-style. Tereza suffers because of him. Her dreams demonstrate that she does not want to live a life indifferent to Tomas's lack of awareness. She has committed herself to being faithful to him and therefore to be vulnerable and to be decisively influenced by his irresponsible life-style. What Communism is doing to Europe, Tomas is doing to her. Her dreams are revealing this to her and, through her, to Tomas. Through her dreams she is reaching out to Tomas. She demonstrates that she is his conscience inviting him to become fully human.

Dreams play an important role in the life of a person since it demonstrates the creative role of the imagination. In connection with Tereza's dreams the textual commentary reads as follows:

Dreaming is not merely an act of communication (or coded communication, if you like); it is also an aesthetic activity, a game of the imagination, a game that is a value in itself. Our dreams prove that to imagine – to dream about things that have not happened – is among mankind's deepest needs. (Kundera, 1987:59)

This deep need of the creative power of the imagination is expressed by Jesus in the Gospel of St. Thomas, as follows: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." The deep need is for articulation of our lives in order to be saved from ourselves and for ourselves. In the case of the dreams of Tereza her suffering also concerns Tomas. Her suffering and articulation of it enables him to realise the need to be saved from himself and for himself.

Tomas also has dreams, usually about erotic encounters. The decisive dream of his life occurs before they decide to leave Prague for the country side. The dream concerns his *anima*, the projection of an ideal woman, whom he never meets in reality and which also withholds him from loving Tereza. On awaking from his dream, he looks at Tereza lying next to him and realises that he must choose between the ideal "woman from Plato's myth" and the abandoned "woman from the bulrush basket". He decides to let go of the 'necessity' of the ideal projection and to accept Tereza, the woman of chance happenings, "the woman born of six laughable fortuities". His dream of the fixation on his *anima* has liberated him from this enslavement. When Tereza opens her eyes and asks him: "What are you looking at?" he decides "to lull her back to sleep, so he tries to come with an answer that would plant the image of a new dream in her mind" (Kundera, 1987:239-240). So, while looking close at her eyes, he convincingly says: "I'm looking at the stars". This episode which depicts Tomas discovering dancing stars in the eyes of Tereza, is complemented by the scene in which he lovingly says, in gratitude towards Tereza, a moment before the fatal accident: "I am so happy".

## 18. Conclusion

I formulated my main task in this essay as follows: to demonstrate the manner in which a film succeeds in integrating signs in such a way that it produces meaning through images. By means of the strategy of intertextuality I suggested that the text of the film should be ascribed an intertextual autonomy with regard to the text of the novel which is acknowledged as a work of art in its own right. I hope that I have also demonstrated that in claiming that a film is an intertextual event one does not remain within the sphere of literature, but enters into a semantic universe in which all texts are relevant. This semantic universe includes the texts of the film, the novel, the world, history, dreams, while not forgetting the writer and the reader both as texts themselves. Needless to say, a different strategy would produce different results.

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