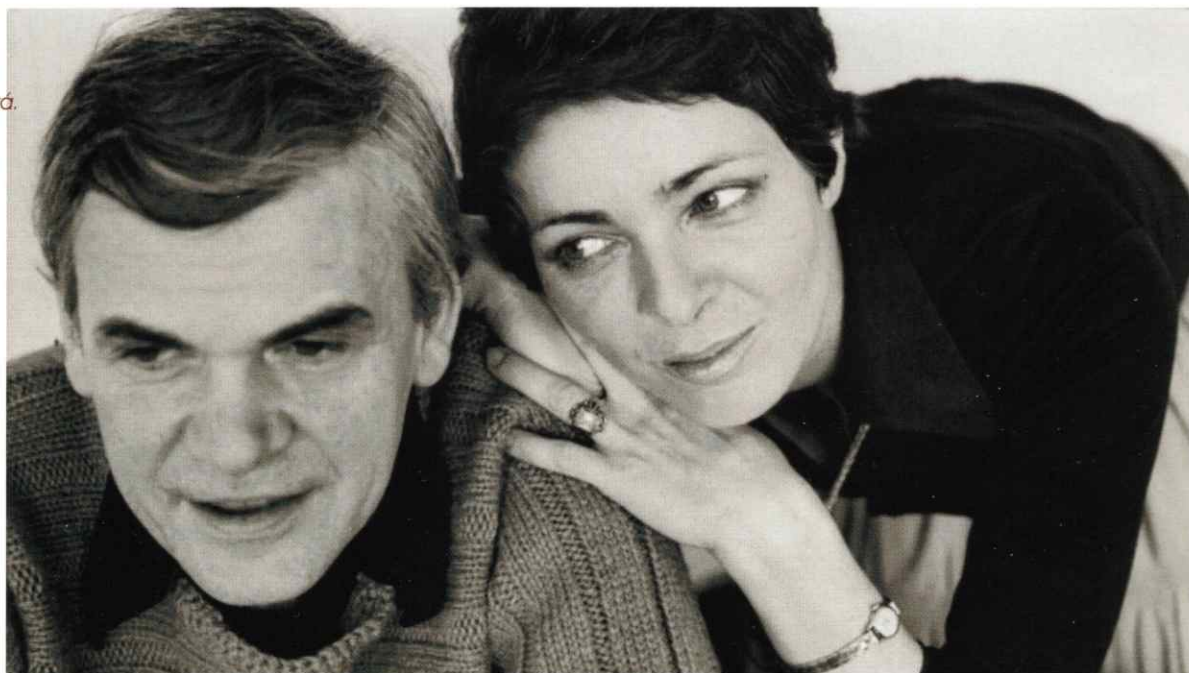


Kundera with his second wife, Věra Hrabánková.



## A writer followed by his previous selves: Milan Kundera

The Czech writer Milan Kundera died in Paris on July 11 at the age of 94. Dr Jan Čulík, senior lecturer in Czech at Glasgow University, has written this assessment of his life and work.

**Milan Kundera was one of the most important twentieth century Czech writers and was one of the few Czech writers who achieved wide international recognition. Kundera was regarded as an important author and intellectual from his early twenties in his native Czechoslovakia.**

Each of his creative works and each of his contributions to the public, political and cultural discourse always provoked a lively debate in the context of its time.

In the first part of his creative career, Kundera was a Communist, although from the inception, his fellow-believers considered him to be an unorthodox thinker.

The story of his writing is a story of many Czech intellectuals of his generation: it is the story of freeing themselves of the Marxist dogma and of gaining and communicating important insights, based on the traumatic experience of life under totalitarianism in Central Europe.

Milan Kundera was born in Brno in the highly cultured middle class family of Ludvík Kundera (1891-1971), a pupil of the composer Leoš Janáček and an important Czech musicologist and pianist, the head of the Brno Musical Academy between 1948 and 1961.

From his early years, Kundera learnt to play the piano with his father. Later, he also studied musicology. Musicological influences can be found throughout Milan Kundera's work.

The author completed his secondary school studies in Brno in 1948. He then started studying literature and aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, but after two terms he transferred to the Film Academy, where he first attended lectures in film direction and then in script writing.

In 1950, he was temporarily forced to interrupt his studies for political reasons. After graduation in 1952 he was appointed as lecturer in world literature at the Film Academy.

In 1950 he and another Czech writer, Jan Trefulka, were expelled from the Communist

Party for "anti-party activities". Trefulka described the incident in his novella *Pršelo jim štěstí* (*Happiness rained on them*, 1962). Kundera used the incident as an inspiration for the main theme of his novel *Žert* (*The Joke*, 1967). Milan Kundera was re-admitted into the Communist Party in 1956. In 1970, he was expelled from the party for the second time.

Kundera later rejected and suppressed most of his literary output produced in the 1950s and the 1960s. He asserted the right of the author to exclude from his work "immature" and "unsuccessful" pieces of writing, the way composers do.

In his mature works of fiction, Kundera created an independent, self-contained world, which was constantly analysed and questioned from a philosophical point of view. However, it would be wrong to regard Kundera as a philosopher.

He was a proponent of no concrete school of thinking. He greatly enjoyed playing with his storylines and while analysing them rationally, he opened up an infinite way of interpreting the presented facts.

In concentrating on the sexual experiences of his characters, Kundera analysed the symbolic social meaning of these erotic encounters, thus being able to deal with the most essential themes concerning man.

Kundera's mature work is the result of his unique Central European experience of disillusionment with the left-wing mythology of Communism and also the product of his fascination with the West European literary tradition, manifested in the works of Rabelais, Diderot, Cervantes and Sterne, as well as with the Central European authors Kafka, Musil, Broch and Heidegger.

Kundera's journey to literary maturity was relatively long. In 1945, Kundera first published translations of poetry by the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in the journal *Gong* in Brno-Královo pole; in 1946, a surrealist poem by Milan Kundera, written undoubtedly under the influence of cousin Ludvík Kundera (born in 1920), a well-known Czech writer and poet in his own right, was printed in the journal *Mladé archy* (*The Young Notebooks*).

Milan Kundera's first book came out in 1953, five years after the Communist takeover of power in Czechoslovakia and dur-

ing the period of rampant Stalinism. It was a collection of lyrical poems, *Člověk zahrada širí* (*Man, a Wide Garden*, 1953).

The young author and many of his contemporaries saw this as an unorthodox departure from the poetics of literature which had been by this time fully enslaved by the orthodox Communist dogma.

In his first collection of poems, Kundera attempted to assume a critical attitude towards this type of "literature", but he still did so from a strictly Marxist point of view.

In 1955, Kundera published a blatant piece of Communist political propaganda, a long poem *Poslední máj* (*The Last May*), a homage to Julius Fučík, the hero of Communist resistance against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia during World War II.

The communist journalist Fučík is transformed into a mythical heroic figure in the poem. Some commentators have speculated that Kundera had been commissioned to write this propagandistic piece and did not really believe in what he was writing.

*Monology* (*Monologues*, first edition 1957) is a collection of poems in which Kundera highlights conflicts between lovers. Here he rejects political propaganda and again stresses the importance of natural, ordinary, authentic human experience. *Monology* is a book of love poetry of a rational, intellectual inspiration. Many poems are based on paradoxes. ("I cannot live with you, you are too beautiful.")

In this first stage of his creative career, Kundera also wrote plays. In *Majitelé klíčů* (*The Owners of the Keys*, 1962), which was very successfully staged in 1962 at the National Theatre in Prague by the experimental director Otomar Krejča, Kundera again attempted gently to humanise totalitarian Communism from within the framework of its own, official referential system.

From the middle of the 1950s, Kundera was a celebrity in Communist Czechoslovakia. He wrote for a number of literary magazines and his articles were followed with considerable interest. In 1955, his article *O sporech dědických* (*Arguing about our inheritance*) stood up for the heritage of Czech and European avant-garde poetry, which until then had been condemned as decadent by official Communist literary scholars.



Equally well received was Kundera's literary study *Umění románu: Cesta Vladislava Vančury za velkou epikou (The Art of the Novel: Vladislav Vančura's journey to the great epic, 1960)*.

This work, which analyses the writings of an outstanding Czech interwar avant garde prose writer (and member of the Communist party) Vladislav Vančura, is a strictly Marxist defence of experimentation in the field of narrative fiction.

The work was significantly influenced by the Hungarian Marxist theoretician György Lukács and his concept of the development of the epic – but writers were not allowed to quote Lukács in Czechoslovakia at that time.

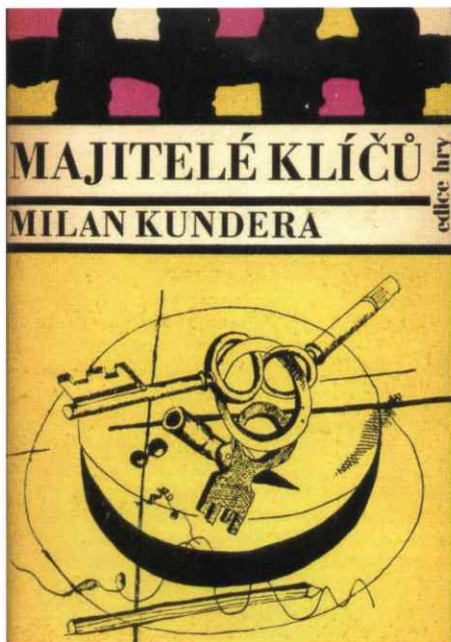
In the controversy that arose among Czech independent intellectuals about Kundera's novels, written in the 1980s (see the debate in the Prague samizdat monthly *Obsah* and the Czech emigré quarterly *Svědectví* in 1985-1988), some Czech writers criticised Kundera, once he had left for the West, for stylising himself into a role of a dissident writer, as though he had never been a Communist.

Thus, in an interview with Philip Roth, Milan Kundera says: "Then they expelled me from university. I lived among workmen. At that time, I played the trumpet in a jazz band in small-town cabarets. I played the piano and the trumpet. Then I wrote poetry. I painted. It was all nonsense. My first work which is worth while mentioning is a short story, written when I was thirty, the first story in the book *Laughable Loves*. This is when my life of a writer began. I had spent half of my life as a relatively unknown Czech intellectual."

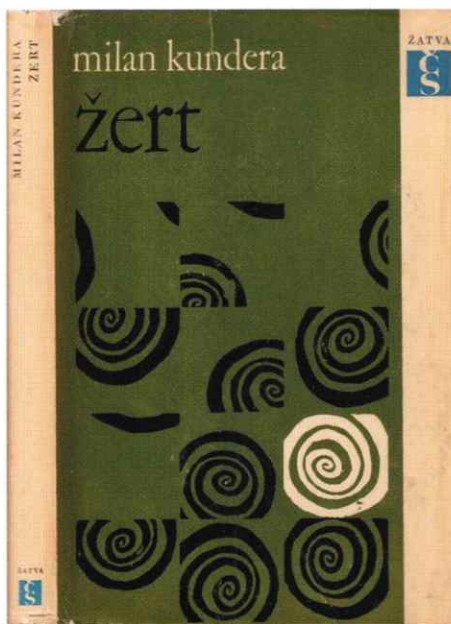
Leading Czech literary critic Milan Jungman reacted to this as follows: "Those who used to know Milan Kundera in the 1950s and the 1960s, can hardly recognise him in this account. The self-portrait has been retouched in such a way that Kundera's real appearance has vanished. Everything essential that formed Kundera's image as a leading intellectual of the past few decades of Czech history has been suppressed."

In Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and the 1960s, Kundera was a major liberalising force in Czech official, Communist literature. Even after the publication of *Směšné lásky (Laughable Loves)* and *Žert*, which are seen by many as heralding an openly anti-totalitarian stage of Kundera's writing, in December 1968, four months after the Soviet invasion, in a article published in *Listy*, Kundera sees himself as a "person belonging to the world of socialism (i.e. Communism)" and criticises Václav Havel for using the arguments of a person who has never accepted Communist ideals.

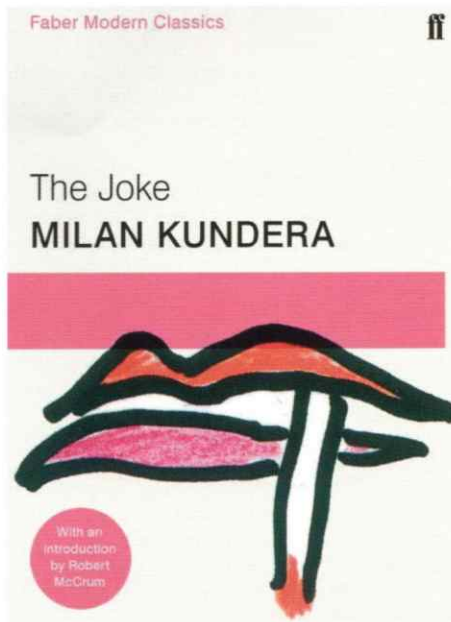
Kundera looked back at the legacy of the 19th century Czech National Revival, at whose inception a handful of Czech intellectuals resurrected the Czech language as an instrument of educated discourse and brought the Czech nation from the threshold of extinction.



Kundera wrote plays in the early part of his career. Above: front cover of *Majitelé klíčů* (*The Owners of the Keys*), 1962.



Above: cover of *Žert*, (*The Joke*), first edition in Czech, 1967. Below: *Faber&Faber English translation from 2016*.



He referred to journalist Hubert Gordon Schauer, who in 1886 asked the re-established Czech national community whether all the effort recreating modern Czech national culture had been worth while. Would it not have been simpler and wiser had the Czechs merged with the larger and more sophisticated German community – he posited – rather than having to start from scratch in all the fields of human activity, in their own language?

Small nations always face the possibility of extinction, said Milan Kundera. There is no point in preserving a separate, Czech identity in the quickly integrating world if this community is incapable of making its own, innovative and unique contribution to mankind, in particular in the field of the arts.

In order to be able to do so, Czech literature and culture must develop in conditions of total freedom. Truth can only be reached in a dialogue conducted by individuals who are equal and free. Having experienced democracy, Nazi subjugation, Stalinism and "socialism", the Czechs are favourably placed to produce a unique testimony about man and his/her predicament, thus giving Czech culture meaning, maturity and greatness.

In the author's own words, Kundera's first mature period started in 1958 (or in 1959, he has given both years) when he "found himself as a writer" while working on his first short story, *Já, truchlivý Bůh (I, the mournful God, 1958)*, which was later included in the first of the three slim volumes of *Směšné lásky (Laughable Loves, 1963, 1965, 1968)*.

It was eventually left out from the definitive Czech edition of this book in 1981 because it was superfluous to the seven-part structure of the collection which Kundera imposed upon it. *Já, truchlivý Bůh* was written as relaxation during the hard work on the play *Majitelé klíčů*.

Like most of the texts in *Směšné lásky*, *Já, truchlivý Bůh*, is a brilliant miniature drama of intimate human relationships. Most of these short stories are based on bitter-sweet anecdotes which deal with the sexual relations of two or three characters.

Kundera believes that looking at people through the prism of erotic relationships reveals much about human nature. Thus he re-works the ancient Don Juan theme. The modern Don Juan, however, no longer conquers women. He just boringly collects them because the convention of the day demands this.

The play *Jakub a jeho pán (Jacques and his Master*, first published in a French translation in 1981, first published in the Czech original in Brno in 1992) was written in Prague in 1971, subsequent to the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968, after Kundera had become a non-person in his native country, along with more than 300 other writers.

*Continued on page 12.*



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The Russian-led invasion ended the 1960s period of liberalisation in Czechoslovakia, which culminated in several months of total media freedom in the spring and summer of 1968 and threw the country into a harsh, neostalinist freeze. This rigid regime of post-1968 “normalisation” lasted practically unchanged until the disintegration of Communism in Czechoslovakia in November 1989.

As the author explains in the 1981 French preface to the piece, the work was the product of yearning for Western rationality, the spirit of doubt and playfulness and the awareness of the relativity of human matters. It was a reaction to the imposition of Russian emotionality on Czechoslovakia, “emotionality, regarded as a value, as a criterion on truth”.

In 1975, it was staged in Ústí nad Labem without giving Kundera’s name as the author. Between 1975 and the fall of communism in 1989, the play had a successful run of 226 performances there.

Kundera’s mature work is littered with statements like the one quoted above. Such statements are paradoxes. They are both true and untrue at the same time. By making them, Kundera encourages the reader to think independently and make his own conclusions.

Life being a giant joke, perpetrated on members of the human race, is the main theme of Kundera’s perhaps most profound novel *Žert* (1967).

In *Žert*, Kundera for the first time developed in great depth the major theme of his writing, namely the warning that it is impossible to understand and control reality. This sceptical attitude is evidently linked with the history of Kundera’s own personal disillusionment with Communism. *Žert* is a challenge to the optimistic proposition, advanced by the Communists in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, who believed that reality can be mastered and controlled by man’s intellect and that man can be the creator of his own destiny.

With typically Kundera-esque irony, the author points out that the Communists’ optimistic belief in an all-powerful human intellect, the culmination of rationalist optimism of the Enlightenment, produced overall destruction, a negation of the world.

Most Western critics originally understood *Žert* as a political novel, a protest against Stalinist totalitarianism. Protest against Stalinism is however only one of many themes in the novel. Kundera rightly objected to such a simplified interpretation.

He pointed out that the 1950s in Czechoslovakia attracted him as a scene for the novel only “because this was a time when history made as yet unheard of experiments with man. Thus it deepened my doubts and enriched my understanding of man and his predicament”.

Czech critics of the 1960s correctly understood *Žert* as a work probing the deepest essence of human existence.

The theme of love-making as an instrument of subjugation also re-appears in Kundera’s play *Dvě uši, dvě svatby* (*Two ears, two weddings*, 1968, printed in 1969 in the *Divadlo* journal under the original title *Ptákovina* (*Nonsense*)). *Ptákovina* is one of the works that Kundera now excludes from the canon of his writing as an immature piece.

*Ptákovina* is first and foremost a work of political satire, in the tradition of East European absurd drama. In this respect, it is quite closely related to the early absurd plays by Václav Havel.

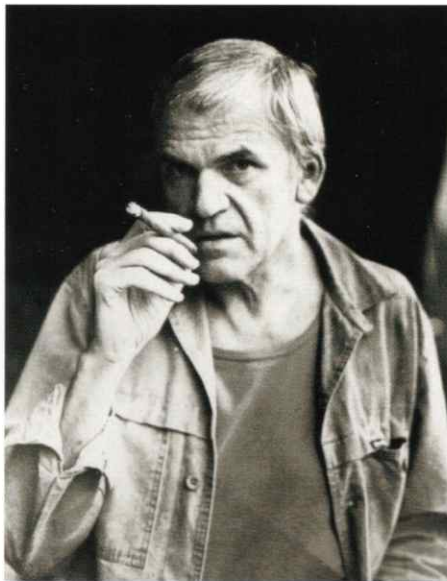
*Život je jinde* (*Life is Elsewhere*, first published in the Czech original in Toronto, 1979, a definitive French translation was published in Paris in 1975) is a novel of exorcism. Milan Kundera started writing it during the

liberal Prague Spring of 1968 and completed it in 1970, during the first wave of the post-1968 clampdown in Czechoslovakia.

In this novel, Kundera confronts his Communist past and frees himself from it. He viciously strips away all remnants of his youthful lyrical personality and of Communist ideology. The novel is a scathing, rational analysis of an immature, narcissistic lyrical attitude, which is destructive in its impotence.

In *Jakub a pán*, Kundera’s and Diderot’s characters created amusing stories because they wanted to shield themselves from an inhospitable human predicament. *Život je jinde* is a new variation on this theme. In Kundera’s view, as expressed in this novel, lyrical characters cannot cope with reality and therefore create an independent reality, poetry, in which they then take shelter. An artificial sign takes over the role of reality.

In lyrical poems, words turn into things. You do not need to reason in lyrical poetry: any lyrical statement becomes the truth. The lyrical poet might say: “Life is as futile as crying,” or he might say: “Life is as cheerful as laughter” and in both instances he will be right. The statements become true because of their beauty.



Lyricism is often associated with a desire for a radical revolution. Lyrical poets always try to find a better world in their poetry than the one in which they are actually living. The name of Kundera’s novel, *Life is Elsewhere*, is a quotation from the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, used by André Breton as the last sentence of his first surrealist manifesto in 1924. The same slogan was used by the French students during their demonstrations in Paris in May 1968. Lyricists yearn for a different world. They are convinced that a radical revolution can bring it about, argues Kundera.

*Valčík na rozloučenou* (*The Farewell Party*, first published in Czech in 1979, definitive French version *La valse aux adieux*, Paris, 1986) uses the form of the French vaudeville. Completed in Prague in 1972, this was supposed to be Kundera’s last novel, a testament. Its original name was *Epilog* (*The Epilogue*).

Kundera had been dismissed from his teaching post at the Prague Film Academy. His books had been withdrawn from bookshops and libraries. Along with hundreds of other writers, he was to be erased from Czech cultural history. Paradoxically, after he had become a non-person, he experienced a feeling of total freedom: for the first time in his life, he could write freely. He knew that his works would “never be published in Bohemia and that no censor would be reading them”.

*Valčík na rozloučenou* is formally a farce. Kundera has filled a comic French form with a serious, ironic content. The result is an overwhelming feeling of the grotesque. The novel deals with misunderstanding within the relationships of five different couples. The main character, trumpet player Klíma, who is deeply in love with his beautiful wife Kamila, realises his love for her by sleeping with other women and by always “returning to Kamila”.

He has had a brief sexual encounter with a local nurse in a West Bohemia spa. The nurse has become pregnant, possibly by another man, but in an instance of “typically feminine”, emotional bad faith, she ascribes the pregnancy to the famous musician Klíma, thus hoping to wield control over him. Much of the novel is devoted to Klíma’s efforts to persuade the nurse to have an abortion.

There is a complicated interaction with the other characters. *Valčík na rozloučenou* is a set of variations on the theme of human misunderstanding. Events, as they occur, are being interpreted by characters incorrectly. Characters often ascribe to events interpretations which are exactly the opposite of their real meaning. The many misunderstandings culminate in an almost accidental killing of the pregnant nurse. The perpetrator of the killing is never discovered. He leaves the country. The novel shows all human “dramas” as futile, insubstantial and irrelevant.

In 1975, Milan Kundera and his wife left Czechoslovakia for France. Kundera was invited to teach at the University of Rennes. In subsequent interviews, the author confessed that the departure from the oppressive atmosphere of occupied Czechoslovakia brought him profound relief. Yet, he continued to look at his native country from the new, French, vantage point with a mixture of affectionate melancholy.

The departure from Czechoslovakia was a watershed for Kundera. He had studied French literature and culture during his Prague years, yet when he settled permanently in France and gained first-hand experience of life in the West, he became able to compare and contrast his work life in the West with life in the East. His critical analysis of both societies was scathing. It took him six years to complete his first “Western” book. During his first years in the West, Kundera maintained that he had said all that he had to say and that he would write no more works of fiction.

*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (*Book of laughter and forgetting*, completed in 1978, published in a French translation in 1979, in the Czech original in 1981) heralded a new stage of Kundera’s career. At the same time, it is a continuation of Kundera’s onslaught on the left-wing myths of his youth. From this point of view, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* highlights again some of the themes dealt with in *Žert* and *Život je jinde*, now from a Western vantage point.

The starting point for Kundera’s novels is a handful of key concepts. In *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* these are forgetting, laughter, angels, pity, frontier. There are several story lines whose characters never meet. The narratives are related to one another only by being variations of the same set of concepts.

Maybe typically for someone who was forced to leave his native country, the main theme of the work is a struggle against forgetting. This theme is present in all chapters of the novel and is examined from many personal as well as social.

In 1978 Milan Kundera and his wife moved to Paris where he taught at the École des Hautes Études. It was in Paris in 1982 that Kundera completed the novel *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, first published in Czech in Toronto,



1985, definitive French edition 1987), his most popular work with Western readers and critics alike.

It was particularly this novel which made Milan Kundera an internationally well-known author, especially after it was turned into a film by director Philip Kaufman in 1988. However, Kundera was unhappy with the film. Neither this movie nor Jaromil Jireš's film version of *Žert*, made in Czechoslovakia in 1968, in any way do justice to the complex, polyphonic structure of Kundera's novels.

Kundera, however, liked Jireš's version of *Žert*. Some Czech critics think that the best film ever made of a work by Milan Kundera is *Nikdo se nebude smát* (*Nobody will laugh*), the 1969 Czech film of a short story from *Směšné lásky*, directed by Antonín Kachlík.

While many of Kundera's frequent witticisms are full of insight, some of them do not always ring true. This may be deliberate provocation. Alfred Thomas has pointed out that the narrator's voice in Kundera's novels must be regarded as one of many voices in the polyphony of views, competing for the reader's attention. The events of the novel often transcend the narrow interpretations offered by the narrator.

Even in this novel, Kundera uses the principle of playfulness and variation as an instrument to examine matters from all sides. He tells the stories of two couples, Tomáš and Tereza and Sabina and Franz. The author again compares and contrasts a number of major themes of his work.

*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* examines Nietzsche's myth of man's eternal return. Kundera concentrates on the fact that man lives only once, Einmal ist keinmal, man has consciousness and reason, but his life is unrepeatable, hence one cannot correct one's mistakes.

This realisation is obviously still connected in the author's mind with his attempts to live down his Communist youth. Since life is unrepeatable, we experience vertiginous lightness, a total lack of responsibility.

The novel *Nesmrtelnost* (*Immortality*, first published in French in 1990, in Czech in 1993) still reflects Kundera's Central European experience, but rather indirectly. *Nesmrtelnost* is the most French of Kundera's novels. The author has produced a most accomplished version of his own, specific genre of the novel based on models from Classicism, a "novel as a debate", whose characters are personifications of ideas and whose narrator freely interrupts the story and reflects on it for the benefit of the reader.

Discursive passages are more frequent in *Nesmrtelnost* than they were in Kundera's earlier work, yet the book retains the character of a polyphonic fictional narrative. It is not a collection of literary essays.

There are no Czech protagonists in *Nesmrtelnost*. The characters are French. The work is a criticism of our civilisation towards the end of the twentieth century, based on concrete experience of life in France. This concrete experience is elucidated by comparisons with relevant events from European cultural history. Thus *Nesmrtelnost* is primarily a European novel with French overtones.

One of the major grievances that Kundera holds against our contemporary world is its tendency to reduce everything to a superficial, easily digestible simplification. This is why he latterly wrote his novels in such a way that they could not be easily summed up. Indeed, in his view, it is the most typical feature of a viable contemporary novel that its "story" cannot be re-told in a few sentences.

Kundera deliberately produced a complicated structure, a mosaic of events where themes and motives from various parts of the novel are interrelated in an intricate, precarious

## Kundera L'identité

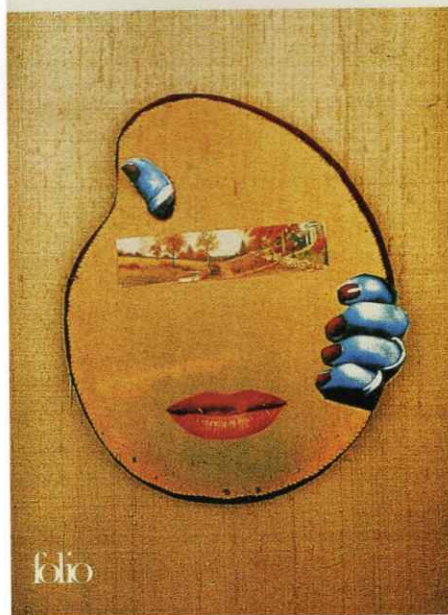


balance. As in his previous novels, narratives and characters are developed in order to analyse certain selected themes from many different angles.

The selection of these themes is still primarily determined by Kundera's traumatic experience from Eastern Europe and by the period of his adjustment to life in the West, which made him compare the cultural differences and similarities in both parts of the European continent.

The creation of fake images is another major theme in *Nesmrtelnost*. Ideologies such as Communism or Nazism no longer present a threat. The real threat now comes of "imagology", i.e. from the media and advertising. The "imagologists" create systems of ideals and anti-ideals that people are supposed unthinkingly to follow, thus reality is destroyed. Agnes unsuccessfully fights the deadening pressures. Another character, defying the "Diabolo" i.e. the monster of the modern world, is the fictitious narrator's grotesque

## Kundera L'ignorance



friend, Professor Avenarius. He punctures the tyres of parked cars during his forays into the night streets of Paris as a gesture of hatred aimed against the destructiveness of modern civilisation.

*Identity* (*L'Identité*, 1998) is another short novel that Kundera wrote in French and it is yet another example of Kundera's accomplished art. The work is a love story; in a way it can perhaps be seen as a sophisticated variation on Kundera's short stories in *Směšné lásky*, in particular *Falešný autostop*.

Here, too, a relationship between two lovers (this time a middle-aged pair) is put to the test by what at the beginning seems like an innocent, although manipulative game. The heroine of the story, Chantal, complains that "men do not look at her any more" and so her lover, Jean-Marc, begins sending her anonymous love letters. The game, which is interpreted differently by the man and the woman, leads to a misunderstanding which almost breaks their relationship.

A catastrophe would ensue, had Kundera not avoided such a clear ending: towards the end of the playful, though serious work, which is again structured like a musical composition, the author insists that at some imperceptible point, the story had become a dream – and its dream-like nature certainly encourages this ambiguous interpretation. Thus instead of a tragedy, the work remains on the level of a warning: *Identity* is a homage to the value of an authentic love bond in a hostile and primitive contemporary world.

First of all Kundera highlighted the contemporary crisis of language, a crisis of meaning and a crisis of communication. His novels are novels about various forms of delusion. In many of his works, a text, a sign, or an image becomes alive and begins to act in the real world with an unstoppable, destructive force.

Kundera's novel *L'Ignorance* (2000) is a meditation on nostalgia, memory and the possibility of a homecoming.

Accused in 2008 by the Czech news-magazine *Respekt* of betraying a Czech airman working for US intelligence more than 50 years earlier, Kundera broke his media silence to issue a furious denial, saying he was "totally astonished" and calling the allegations "the assassination of an author". It has to be said that the accusation, raised by *Respekt* against Kundera, was based on extremely shoddy investigative work.

His guilt has never been proven, although some Czech right-wing propagandists do treat it as if it were a fact. Yale University specialist in Czech Studies Karen von Kunes pointed out in an interview with *Britské listy* that if Kundera reported anything at all to the authorities, it would have been the appearance of a suitcase in a student dorm.

An open letter signed by Philip Roth, Salman Rushdie, JM Coetzee and other eminent writers noted that, despite the claims of the magazine that published the accusation, "a witness statement by an eminent Prague scientist clears [Kundera] of any guilt. Too often, the press has spread this defamatory rumour without taking care to report the evidence refuting it."

A final brief novel, *La festa dell'insignificanza* (*The Festival of Insignificance*), appeared in Italian translation in 2013. It divided reviewers when it appeared in English.

After 40 years away, apart from brief and hidden visits to their homeland, Kundera and his wife Vera's Czech citizenship was finally restored in 2019, a year after they met with the Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš, who described the meeting as a "great honour". This is an English translation of an article that appeared on the *Britské listy* website ([www.blisty.cz](http://www.blisty.cz)).