

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 4. 4. 2022

# Milan Kundera and Film

“I went to FAMU (Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), and I remember my reasoning behind that decision: I renounce music and poetry because I am too fond of it and study film as it’s not very appealing to me. It will thus be easier for me to get rid of personal hobbies and focus only on a just art that serves.”<sup>[1]</sup>

After finishing grammar school in Brno, Milan Kundera studied literary science and aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts in Prague. He didn’t finish his studies. It was probably because he was expelled from the Communist party in 1950. He later went to FAMU where he took up film direction and subsequently, under the tutelage of writer and dramaturge Miloš Václav Kocián, screenwriting. After completing his graduation project, the script of the feature film *Božena Horová*, and his diploma thesis, “Stalin in the fight against Trotskyism in the Soviet literature and the situation on our artistic front,” he began lecturing at FAMU.

Until 1970, he lectured on world literature. First as an assistant, after defending his theoretical thesis on Vladislav Vančura and being reinstated in the Communist party as a lecturer without a doctoral degree and eventually, from 1964, as a principal lecturer. His lectures on the building principles of novels drawing among other things from György Lukács’ Theory of the Novel were fondly remembered by filmmakers such as Jiří Menzel, Agnieszka Holland and Antonín Máša: “FAMU lecturers were prominent personalities, and one is enriched by meeting a personality. For me, they were Milan Kundera, František Daniel and M. V. Kratochvíl.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Kundera also explored the links between literature and film and individual new wave directors in cultural periodicals such as *Světová literatura*, *Literární noviny* and *Host do domu*, which served as open discussion platforms and thus played an important part in the liberalisation of Czech culture and society

In the first half of the 1960s, Kundera, a former proletarian poet, started his career as a prose writer. Already his debut *Laughable Loves* (Směšné lásky) served as the basis for two film adaptations. *Laughable Loves* was actually published three times. The first edition was published by Československý spisovatel in 1963 and contained the stories *I, the Distressing God* (Já, truchlivý bůh), *Sister of My Sisters* (Sestřičko mých sestřiček) and *Nobody Will Laugh* (Nikdo se nebude smát). Another book followed two years later (*The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire* (Zlaté jablko věčné touhy), *Harbinger* (Zvěstovatel) and *The Hitchhiking Game* (Falešný autostop). Another three years later, shortly after the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the third and final book was published (*Symposium* (Symposion), *Let the Old Dead Make Room for the Young Dead* (Ať ustoupí starí mrtvý mladým mrtvým), *Eduard and God* (Eduard a Bůh) and *Dr. Havel after Twenty Years* (Doktor Havel po dvaceti letech)).

All three stories from the first book were adapted for the big screen or television. The stories *Eduard and God* and *Hitchhiking Game* were adapted into several student films.[3]

The first one to adapt Kundera was Miloslav Zachata. His 30-minute-long television dramatization of *Sister of My Sisters* was broadcast on 2 August 1963. But the first feature adaptation of Kundera was made two years later by his former student Hynek Bočan.

Kundera's tragicomic story *Nobody Will Laugh* was adapted into a script by yet another person who frequented his lectures – Pavel Juráček. Thanks to a recommendation from his pedagogue, he was offered a dramaturge position in the Barrandov creative group Šmídá-Kunc in 1960.

The increasingly renowned writer defended new wave films and filmmakers many times. When for instance Věra Chytilová's *Daisies* (Sedmíkrašky, 1966) became the subject of MP Pružinec's interpellation in May 1967, it was Kundera who responded to the politician's outraged criticism at the 4<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Association of Czechoslovak Writers.

Kundera summarised his opinion on the “Czechoslovak film miracle” in his essay about Forman's film *The Firemen's Ball* (Hoří, má panenko, 1967):

“The imbecility of commercial interests and the irreconcilability of the ideological dogma are two evils threatening the art of film. When Czech cinema had been nationalised right after the war, it was liberated from the first evil, and during the 1960s, it was gradually shaking off the second one. In this brief moment of freedom (freedom so relative but so rare on our planet), many talented Czech filmmakers were born.”[4]

In the spring of 1967, two years after Kundera finished writing it, his first novel *The Joke* (Žert) was published. This polyphonic contemplation of human powerlessness in the context of history was a big hit among domestic readers, who quickly bought out all copies, and it also made Kundera’s name known in the West. A year later, the book won the award of the Association of Czechoslovak Writers and was adapted into a film.

Because of the absence of a reflexive dimension, Kundera had his reservations about *Nobody Will Laugh*, but in the case of *The Joke* (Žert, 1968), he collaborated with director Jaromíl Jireš from the very beginning. The script was being written when the manuscript of the novel still awaited approval by censors. Kundera was satisfied with the compositionally compact film, which stresses the tragic elements instead of the ironic ones from the novel and reduces the number of narrators and timelines, as evidenced by his words published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* after the film’s first screening in France:

“In comparison to the film, the novel is much more extensive than the film, so I knew that it would be necessary to rewrite, simplify and condense. I think that I succeeded and my dear friend Jireš, whom I haven’t seen for so long, took care of the rest: he picked and directed actors (brilliant actors), created the atmosphere, gave the film a rhythm and masterfully, with an extraordinary sensitivity, alternated between individual ranges of emotions.” [5]

The last adaptation before Kundera’s emigration was his very first story *I, the Distressing God* (Já, truchlivý bůh, 1969). While writing it in the late 1950s, Kundera allegedly discovered himself as an author. The director of this adaptation was Antonín Kachlík, the infamous director of regime-conforming works from the Normalisation period. But in the 1960s, he made several formally good films, even though none of

them received fame similar to the work of more talented new wave filmmakers.

Kundera once again worked on the script alongside the director. Just like in the case of the two years older television adaptation by Jaroslav Horan, they decided to use alienating speeches of the protagonist directed at the audience. He intersperses his commentaries with bon mots pulling us out of the story and corresponding with the metaliterary nature of the story. The critics couldn't agree whether such a slavish and blatant adaptation was harmful to the film or whether it facilitated the nature of the story.

*I, the Distressing God* was made in the tense atmosphere following the invasion in a time of increasing repressions and censorship pressure. Already in April 1968, in a dispatch from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kundera (alongside Václav Havel, Ludvík Vaculík and Pavel Kohout) was named as a member of a group seeking to overthrow socialism in Czechoslovakia. After the events of August 1968, he logically found himself on the top of a notional list of people whose further public activities were undesirable.

In early 1970, his novel *The Joke* was pulled from bookshops and libraires. Jireš's eponymous film lasted only a year longer. Just like many other pedagogues and students, Kundera was forced to leave FAMU. The golden era of the 1960s was definitely over. In 1975, France became Kundera's new home.

Only one more work written by Kundera was professionally adapted for the big screen. He gave his approval to American director Philip Kaufman to make *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí, 1988), which was originally offered to Miloš Forman. But Kundera wasn't very satisfied with this co-produced romantic drama and from then on didn't allow any other adaptations of his work. That applies – among other books – also to *The Farewell Waltz* (Valčík na rozloučenou, 1972), a book which yet another one of Kundera's former students, Agnieszka Holland, wanted to adapt.

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#### Notes:

[1] Antonín Jaroslav Liehm, *Generace*. Prague: Československý spisovatel 1990, p. 54.

[2] Miloš Fikejz, Pokus o inventuru minulosti s Antonínem Mášou. *Kino* 45, no. 9, 1990, p. 3.

[3] *Eduard and God*, (Eduarda Bůh, dir. Jan David, 1969), *Weekend* (dir. Rafal Mierzejewski, 1987), *The Hitchhiking Game* (*Falszywy autostop*, dir. Denis Delic, 1995), *The Hitchhiking Game* (dir. Shane Davey, 2002), *Auto Stop* (dir. Nasser Saffarian, 2003).

[4] Milan Kundera, Formanovo Hoří, má panenko. *Iluminace* 8, no. 1, 1996, p. 5.

[5] Quote: Jean-Dominique Brierre, *Milan Kundera. Život spisovatele*. Prague: Argo 2020, p. 117.