

## Postmodernism and the Concept of *Kitsch*- As in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

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**Abstract:** The concept of *Kitsch* is one of the difficult concepts which has been so easily handles by Milan Kundera in his incredible work of art – *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Culturally accepted words and situations vs. the words which are labeled as grotesque points out that peculiar point which deviates the ordinary to sublimity. This paper studies that ordinary which is ignored in culture through Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

**Keywords:** *Kitsch*, Postmodernism, Phenomenology, Milan Kundera, Ideologies and Culture.

When I came across the concept of Taipei modern Toilet diner, I was reminded of Milan Kundera's *Kitsch*...This Modern Toilet diner is one of chain of themed eateries in Taiwan appealing to largely the youngsters of the city. This diner has greater relevance to the modern culture, culture in which youngsters call each other by bad words out of love...they have overcome all the grotesques!? Are they above all the human hurts?! Or is it an effort to deviate from *kitsch*!?

Milan Kundera in his *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* talks about the concept of *Kitsch*. *Kitsch* is a German word that's been adopted by a number of other languages, including English. It refers primarily to art that is overly sentimental or melodramatic, and so refers to aesthetics. What's interesting is the way Kundera uses the concept in his novel, not to talk about art, but to talk about political ideology and about life.

Kundera asserts that *kitsch* is an aesthetic ideal "in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist". (TULB 244) He's not just speaking literally here, but about all the bad, disgusting, negative, violent, depressing things in the world. *Kitsch* excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence, and thus the very existence of the most important feature for life itself is denied.

Kundera moves on to politics. "*Kitsch* is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements" he says (TULB 243). He gives the example of politicians kissing babies as the ultimate *kitschy* political move. When Sabina the character in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* recalls the communist parades of her youth, she remembers that the parades tricked the participants into celebrating Communism by pretending they were celebrating life – a hokey, sentimental life embracing only the positive. (TULB 251) According to *Unbearable Lightness*, the problem comes when one has to deal with *totalitarian kitsch*. He explains this in detail:

"Those of us who live in a society where various political tendencies exist side by side and competing influences cancel or limit one another can manage more or less to escape the *kitsch* inquisition: the individual can preserve his individuality. The

artist can create unusual works. But whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of totalitarian kitsch.

When I say “totalitarian,” what I mean is that everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life: every display of individualism (because a deviation from the collective is a spit in the eye of the smiling brotherhood); every doubt (because anyone who starts doubting details will end by doubting life itself); all irony (because in the realm of kitsch everything must be taken quite seriously).” (TULB 247)

Sabina in earlier pages thinks that “behind Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil and that the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison” (3.5.8). Now we know what that pervasive evil is “totalitarian kitsch”

So how does one fight *kitsch*? One answer has its roots in the original, artistic definition of kitsch as sentimental or hokey art. Sabina, who openly proclaims “My enemy is kitsch!”, manages to dying anyone who comes in her way.

The narrator tells the story of Stalin’s son’s death. In a German camp, Yakov Stalin had a dispute with the British prisoners over the fact that he habitually made a mess in the latrine. Ignored by the German officer in charge and humiliated over the idea that he should be judged because of shit, Yakov threw himself against an electrified wire fence. Yakov was unable to accept the lightness of being. Kundera praises Yakov Stalin’s death as the only metaphysical death of World War II. The religious problem of shit is raised—does God have intestines, did Adam defecate in the Garden of Eden?

Most European credos, religious or political, state that the world is good and human existence positive: Kundera calls this “categorical agreement with being.” Shit, however, has no place in any of these credos. Instead, their aesthetic ideal is kitsch, which can be considered “the absolute denial of shit.” Sabina’s lifelong enemy is this same kitsch. She sees it in America when a Senator smiles at children. She describes the first tear as saying the children are lovely and move him. The second tear says, how profound and moving of me to be moved by this sight—“t is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.” Sabina always argued with the conventional statement that Communist reality was worse than the Communist ideal; in the world of the ideal, the world of kitsch, she would not be able to survive emotionally for more than a few days.

To escape kitsch, Sabina hides the fact she is Czech, for fear people will interpret her as a romantic persecuted artist. Sabina lives with an elderly couple now, which soothes her guilt over abandoning her family. She realizes her life is not devoid of kitsch, and that she too falls prey to sentimentality.

Franz still lives a happy existence in Geneva, with his mistress. A friend invites him to join the Grand March on Cambodia. At first Franz refuses out of consideration and love for his mistress, but then he feels that Sabina would have wanted him to go. The march to Cambodia is a horror. The French and Americans compete for leadership; a movie star and a pop singer use the march for publicity, and feel proud of themselves when a journalist is accidentally killed and consecrates their

publicity stunt with blood. Even Franz, who worships kitsch, is shaken, and when the march fails is not sure how to interpret events.

Kundera discusses categories of men who need to be seen. The first three categories are those who need a public of unknown eyes, those who need a public of familiar eyes, and those who want to be in the eyes of the person they love. Kundera characterizes Franz as a member of the fourth category of men: dreamers who live to be seen and appreciated by an imaginary being. For Franz the imaginary person is Sabina; for Tomas's son Simon, also a dreamer, and the person whom he wants appreciation from is Tomas.

After Tomas's death, Simon begins writing letters to Sabina; he knows she was his father's mistress, and that she provides a link to Tomas. Sabina, who lives in California, draws up a will and asks to be cremated at death, and her ashes scattered, so she can die as lightly as she lived.

In Cambodia, a group of men ask Franz for money and attack him. Thinking only of Sabina and how she had admired his strength and wanted him to use it, Franz decides to fight. He is hit in the back of the head, and wakes up briefly in the hospital to see his wife Marie-Claude by his bed. He cannot speak to ask her to leave, and closes his eyes. He dies. Marie-Claude claims the body, arranges a lavish funeral, and has the words "A return after long wanderings" written on his tombstone. Simon orders "He wanted the kingdom of God on earth" written on Tomas's grave.

The chapter finishes the stories of Franz and Sabina, leaving them to ends that feel inevitable. Franz, who deceived himself all his life, dies an unnecessary death brought on by self-deception. After imbuing his life with heaviness and meaning, Franz dies a meaningless death. Franz did not even have the comfort of total self-deception; at the end of his life he began to understand that he might have been wrong on some counts. He recognized the futility of the Cambodia march, and wanted to be with the woman he loved, his current mistress, despite the fact that she fell short of his ideal.

Sabina, after a life of betrayals and flights, ends up alone and anonymous in California. She is no longer even recognized as Czech; it is as if her lightness has managed to erase even her ethnicity and nationality. We do not know whether or not she is happy; she plans her death, but does so on her own terms and in keeping with the way she has lived.

This chapter is most important for its description and definition of kitsch. Kundera understands kitsch as the second, phony tear of the self-satisfied senator, the forced tear that knows it is being caught on camera or observed by potential voters—in other words, as a lie that pretends the world is perfect. Both Tomas and Sabina want a world in which shit exists—in which darkness and unpleasantness exist so that eroticism, individuality, creativity and playfulness can exist too.

The ending pages, with their almost cruel wrap-ups of Franz and Tomas's lives, are both tragic and light. It seems tragic that the men are so misrepresented and misunderstood, as evidenced by the wrongheadedness of their epithets: "A return after long wanderings" merely acts as wish-fulfillment for Marie-Claude, who would like to believe that Franz returned to her. In reality, Franz did just the opposite, straying farther and farther from her until he found genuine affection with his mistress. Tomas's epithet, "He wanted the kingdom of God on earth", does Tomas an injustice, since he did not want a kingdom on earth; he wanted messy imperfection, shit, individuality, and no

kitsch. Still, the narrator points out that these misrepresentations can be understood as humorous, ridiculous, and even liberatingly light.

Kundera associates heaviness with Nietzsche and the philosophy of eternal return. Kundera does not believe eternal return exists, and argues that man only has the opportunity to try one path, and hence has no point of comparison or meaning. Instead, those characters who are heavy cannot accept this unbearable lightness of being, and seek to attach a meaning and weight to what they consider important in life. Tereza and Franz are both heavy characters. Tereza is heavy emotionally and cannot cope with the lightness around her, and is driven nearly to insanity. Franz, interpreting all the events of his life as heavy, is led to an early and unnecessary death.

The *Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a dialogue with Friedrich Nietzsche and a manifesto of embracing nihilism. Milan Kundera opens the novel with a discourse on Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence. He rejects any view of the recurrence as being real or metaphysical. He assures it to be metaphorical. In a world of objective meaninglessness one must fall into nihilism unless one acts as if one's acts recur eternally, thus giving our acts "weight," the weight of those choices we make, as though recurring eternally, living forever. Kundera rejects Nietzsche's optimism and in compelling detail and poignancy he give us the story of the painful love affair of Tomas and Tereza, condemned by fate and choice to live together, yet never ceasing to cause each other enormous pain and suffering.

Tereza's dog Karenin develops a wound on his leg which turns out to be cancer. Tereza is heartbroken, and thinks how much she prefers animals to people. She considers various moments of mass cruelty to animals, some of which cruelties were institutionalized under the Soviet regime. "True human goodness, in all its purity and freedom, can come to the fore only ...towards those who are at its mercy: animals." (TULB 278)

Arguing with Tomas over Karenin and finding a letter to Tomas in a woman's handwriting, Tereza reflects that she seems to love her dog better than her husband. With the dog, she expects nothing and feels no shame; Kundera speculates that an animal is closer to Adam than fallen man is, and that a dog was never expelled from Eden. Tereza and Tomas put Karenin to sleep after spending some final moments with him; Tereza thinks the dog is smiling. They bury Karenin.

Kundera contrasts Tereza's emotions for Karenin with her feelings for Tomas. She consistently wonders at the selflessness of her love for an animal, and at the security and comfort she feels when with her dog. She feels infinitely more insecure and desperate in her love for Tomas. The contrasts illustrates the selfishness and neediness of human love. Kundera ends *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* with the concepts of perfect love and human goodness—happy concepts, although Kundera claims they exist only rarely, and then only in the love of human and animal. Kitsch for Kundera, is art removed of life's messy bits: revulsion and reverence, pain and suffering, decay and waste.

Kundera's kitsch is a sanitized art of Pollyannaish desire that wants nothing to do with the more disturbing parts of our existence. The desire to turn away from shit informs all aspects of our lives; as Kundera puts it, "kitsch is an integral part of the human condition". Denial of it marks the phenomenological study of the human mind which has perceived its own right and wrongs and has ultimately has end up paving way to Bakhtin's grotesques and the ensuing abhorrence to existence.

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