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## **Like a Feather Falling: A Critical Analysis of Kundera's Novel in Variations**

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**Universiteit  
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**Like a Feather Falling**  
A Critical Analysis of Kundera's Novel in Variations

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# Abstract

This project has three primary objectives, all of which, despite their apparent differences, share a common purpose: to consider Milan Kundera's body of novels, that is his novelistic *oeuvre*, as a single work in variations. The aim is to delve into the intricate layers of Kundera's narrative style and thematic exploration across three specific novels. These novels, namely *The Joke* (1967), represents Kundera's initial foray into the realm of the novel, *Immortality* (1990), which the author himself considers the epitome of his novelistic achievement, and *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013), his most recent publication, will serve as the focal points of analysis.

The investigation will primarily concentrate on two recurring themes prevalent throughout each of these novels: the existential inquiry into the nature of the self and humourism, a concept read through Luigi Pirandello's lenses in his essay *L'umorismo* (1908). By closely examining Kundera's treatment of these themes, the aim is to comprehensively understand his unique philosophical perspectives. Additionally, this study will involve drawing connections between Kundera's ideas and the theories put forth by Luigi Pirandello and Jean Baudrillard, in their works *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904), *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (1926) and *Precession of Simulacra* (2009), respectively. Specifically, an exploration of their notions concerning social impositions and the momentary liberation from oppressive cultural constructs that can be achieved through the medium of the novel.

Ultimately, the ultimate intent lies in ascertaining Kundera's claim of his novelistic *oeuvre* as a single work with variations. Through an examination of the thematic unity that permeates these seemingly disparate novels, Kundera's assertion will be established and reinforced by their thematic coherence. By recognizing the interconnections and underlying red threads that bind these works together, the reader will perhaps appreciate the depth and complexity of Kundera's artistic vision and gain valuable insights into the human condition as portrayed through his multifaceted narratives.



To my abuelita Renata



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Literature has always accompanied me through life. My appreciation for this subject lies in its ability to transport an individual into an unknown world, ready to be discovered through a few black ink marks on paper. Growing up, I noticed how my interest and focus on the novels shifted or rotated from the character's experiences or adventures to their or the author's introspectiveness. For example, Kafka's ruminations, Marai's long digressions or Murakami's use of magic realism, fascinate me for their ability to express things I feel but cannot articulate. During my Bachelor studies, my professor of Comparative Literature often referred to Milan Kundera, particularly comparing him to Kafkian existentialism. For this reason, I decided to undertake this literary adventure into Kundera's *oeuvre* from his first novel *The Joke* (1967). Most intriguing is his ability to create poetry and existential philosophy from the minimum and most common situation, allowing the reader to believe that anything can reach the value of poetry.

Existentialism and queries about identity and how to live have always been a part of human philosophy through the ages. In contrast to other living beings, that can define and identify their diversity through personal odour and scents, humans need to portray and represent themselves through language. However, as Lacan discussed in *The Mirror Stage* (1949), the dimension of the Real cannot be discussed, for it would cease to exist. Linguistic representation is insufficient to affirm and construct one's identity. It can only be analysed or studied through its effects concerning the other two orders: the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The dimension of the Imaginary relies upon human's fascination with form. In fact, as is described by Lacan in his work (1949), one reaches their mirror stage, they see their reflection in the mirror for the first time, and their self-recognition starts. In this case, it is worth noting that this self-recognition is achieved through an aesthetic fiction that will dictate the subject. One must consider that this self-recognition does not align with the view of others. The formation of subjectivity is dictated by the *imago*, a Latin word meaning appearance and effigy, that relies solely on the gaze of the other. Hence, it neither includes nor considers the inner and hidden parts of a person. Of course, the more gazes one is subjected to, the more discernment and opinions on their subjectivity are made.

The perfect example of one writer who reflects on the diverse interpretations and analyses of their persona and works is Milan Kundera. His *oeuvre* navigates

the exploration of *simulacrum*, the inauthenticity of the every day, and the search for the real behind the mask. Kundera is a particular author who has received various and distinct reviews and understandings because of his unique style. More specifically, the focus has been on the diverse interpretations of his writing and display of human emotion, from authors such as Italo Calvino or Eugène Ionesco, as opposed to a complete political comprehension of his works, from critics like Peter Steiner or Lucio Lombardo Radice.<sup>1</sup> These latter and circumscribed interpretations target precisely Kundera's personal life and his digressions and interventions about the Communist Regime in Czechoslovakia. However, if based on the assumption that the writer and person are one thing, the works are analysed and processed as if the life and image of the author were projected onto them. As Kundera has underlined many times, his novels are not to be taken seriously and do not echo a political agenda. However, they depict and understand, or attempt to, the general human experience. For this reason, in this thesis, a precise and detailed overview and divagation of Kundera's life will be avoided. The focus will be on a selection of his novels, which will be analysed following Barthes' conception of the 'Death of the Author', a reading not subjected to the authoritative power of the Author.<sup>2</sup> Thus, only a brief outline of what usually is written on the frontispiece of his works will be offered: a Czech writer who lives in France since 1975.

I chose Milan Kundera's novels as the object of this analytical argumentation because he is one of my favourite authors. What I find interesting about his writings is the precise uniqueness and peculiarity characteristic in his works, from which the author becomes instantly recognisable to the reader. His long digressions and philosophical queries, connected to his bluntness and the merging of dream and reality, are motives that help the comprehension and understanding of the characters, who become and represent thorough exempla of human inwardness. Another essential concept of this writer is his complete appreciation and devotion to the novel as a genre. In fact, through the years, Kundera has dedicated his life not only to writing novels but also to creating and moulding his own understanding of the genre, his own art of the novel.

He wrote many essays that concern this genre, and precisely in *Art du roman* (1986), Kundera expressed his complete and personal idea of creative creation. He is mostly tied to authors such as Rabelais, Cervantes and Boccaccio, who represent the pillars of his art of the novel. More specifically, following the French philosopher and writer Rabelais, Kundera displays human emotions, and, at the same time, the absurd and the laughter are ever-present when concerning deeper themes. Kundera appreciates Cervantes' ability to present the nonsensical human inwardness and, finally, Boccaccio's fulfilment of the Horatian Latin motto *docere et delectare*, which means educating while delighting. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Kundera's passion and knowledge of music need mentioning. In his essays about the novel genre,<sup>3</sup> Kundera defines the novel in variation by following musical discourse. Music variations can dif-

<sup>1</sup>See Rizzante, Massimo. *Milan Kundera*. Marcos y Marcos, 2002.; and Radice Lucio. *Sul socialismo reale*. Editori Riuniti, 1990; and see Steiner Peter. *Justice in Prague, Political and Poetic: Some Reflections on the Slansky Trial* (with Constant Reference to Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera). *Poetics Today* 1 December 2000; 21 (4): 653–679.

<sup>2</sup>see Barthes, Roland. 'The Death of the Author'. *The Northon Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. IIIrd ed. W. W. Norton Company, 2018 (pp. 1268-1272).

<sup>3</sup>See *L'art du Roman* (1986), *Les testaments trahis* (1993), *Le rideau* (2004), *Une rencontre* (2006).

ferentiate through diverse melodic, harmonic or rhythmic compositions without violating the essence of the primary theme (*Testaments Betrayed*, 1993, 73). Even if variations might differ from one another, their unity resides in their mutual and shared affiliation with the central motif. Similarly, novels can display diverse and imaginary situations or characters (*Art of the Novel*, 41) that allow the reader to investigate and explore the same themes from different points of view. In effect, the coherence of the work of art, thus the novel in variations, is guaranteed by its thematic unity (38). More specifically, Kundera's novels question humans' existence and experience and propose existentialist queries that are expressed and portrayed under different lenses. The narration of diverse and particular episodes is necessary to create a profound discourse that transcends the single case. By proposing different points of view on the same theme, Kundera wants to create a sole and profound discourse on that precise motif by depicting human life and its relatable sorrows and experiences. At first glance, the stories might appear banal and minimal. Through the texts, the reader is encouraged to understand, comprehend and maybe even react to the social and cultural challenges of the twenty-first century. The main themes or tropes of Kundera's novels are individuality and creation of the self, love, memory, revenge and oblivion. Everything is written under the magnifying glass of *umorismo*.

## 1.1 Research Question

Milan Kundera has affirmed that the totality of his novels can be considered one work or novel in variations. Therefore, the purpose of this analytical assessment is to explore the validity of his assertion. More specifically, this study will be made through a consideration of three of his works, following a chronological order. By doing so, an examination of the themes will become possible: subjectivity and humourism.

The novels chosen for this research project are *The Joke* (1967), *Immortality* (1990) and *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013). The purpose is to understand and demonstrate how Kundera portrays and discusses these themes. Most importantly, the intention is to assess whether his works can be considered a whole novel in variations and if these conceptions and depictions have developed through time. Can three novels, published precisely twenty-three years apart, still present the same *topoi*?

As mentioned above, the central themes and concepts of the analysis of this research are the creation of identity and humourism. How Kundera portrays his characters and their identity creation but concerning two well-known authors and philosophers such as Luigi Pirandello and Jean Baudrillard. Pirandello is a famous Italian writer who lived between 1896 and 1936 and is considered the most influential for the development of existentialism in the twentieth century. Baudrillard, who lived between 1929 and 2007, worked as a sociologist and philosopher interested in semiology and contemporary culture and society. The relationship between Pirandello and Kundera's works will focus on Pirandello's existentialism and the queries of the self. In addition, the connection between Baudrillard and Kundera will stress Baudrillard's assessment of how it is possible to overcome the power of the image (*Precession of Simulacra*, 2009). Thus, the existential question of overcoming the voidness and hopelessness of

being no one when this age of globalisation and mass uniformity, appearance and image, remains open for debate and analysis. Furthermore, the theme of humourism must be understood as a creative style or way of writing. In fact, it does not follow the common understanding of the term, but Pirandello's ideas and perceptions are displayed on *L'umorismo* (1920). Thus, humourism will not be considered as *umoris* or emotional state but as the understanding and comprehension of human life, that is *umorismo*. The link between the two themes relies upon the idea that *umorismo* can depict, study and show the dualism of ideal and real, outwardness and inwardness. Their opposition, rooted in human minds, is understandable and recognisable only through the lenses of *umorismo*.

For their interaction, the reader will notice how Kundera's discourse echoes other authors and their philosophies. Theorists such as Roland Barthes, Simone de Beauvoir and Iris van der Tuin and their theories will be mentioned and applied. Barthes is a literary theorist who lived between 1915 and 1980 and influenced the development of diverse theories such as (post)structuralism, anthropology and cultural theory. Simone de Beauvoir, (1908 and 1986), was a philosopher and writer of existentialism and, even if from her always refuted, she is considered the mother of the second wave of Feminist Theory. Lastly, van der Tuin is a Dutch sociologist and professor in Theory of Cultural Inquiry at Utrecht University, and her area of expertise includes Feminist theory and methodology, gender studies and interdisciplinary studies. Regarding the theories applied, the reader will notice an obvious connection with these theorists. More precisely, the imposition of norm or *doxa*, the oppression of the woman into an objectified role, and the attempt to not let the research be trapped in a construction of gender opposition and sexual difference, respectively.

## 1.2 Theory and Theorists

Kundera states that his novels cannot be taken seriously or analysed with a political agenda in mind (*Comedy is Everywhere*, 1977, 6). He claims that politically motivated interpretations ultimately murder the book. Kundera believes that novels have to give joy and represent a game where the serious and the light-hearted continually interact. The notion of Kundera's absurd is intimately connected to the theme of *umorismo*. This concept does not fall into the canon of satire and comedy but, in my view, it follows Luigi Pirandello's theory, a contrary feeling escorted by an unconcealed reflection.

Luigi Pirandello lived between 1896 and 1936. He was one of the most influential dramatists, poets and existential thinkers of the twentieth century who received the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1934. His works, whether novels, essays or plays, are a space for the mind and the soul where the human conscience and existence shown are torn by in-authenticities that make them live in this illusion. Fantasy is the only thing that can help us suspend this weight of social convention and expectations. *Umorismo*, then, shows this duality between the free movement of the inner life and the form needed for the sentiment to communicate or be communicated.

In 1908 Pirandello published an essay, *L'umorismo*, which is the merging of his thoughts on the topic. In this book, he tries to give a proper definition of humorism, pointing out the fact that it represents something completely different from comedy, irony or satire. He explains this theory by comparing what a

comic and a *umorista* would do in the same situation. Here is when Pirandello calls *umorismo* the perception of the contrary (126). In opposition to the comic is *umorismo* which stems from more profound circumstances, the sense of emotion universal to human fragility from which arises the commiseration for others' frailties, which are also our own. At this point, contemplation mirrors the idea causing the breakdown of every image, real or ideal. The idea is also read as an illusion or appearance: therefore, the work of art becomes a fight between illusion and humoristic reflection that breaks down these ostensible constructions. The reader will notice how Kundera's novels, specifically *Immortality* (1990), for the style, long digressions and the use of diverse characters' thoughts, do what Pirandello described in his essay (1920): to allow the reader to learn acceptance and comprehension toward the other.

From the comparison between image, ideal and reality, I would like to land into the analysis of identity creation. One of the main themes that Luigi Pirandello studied is identity, the opposition between form and life and the crisis of the self. In works such as *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (1926) or *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904), Pirandello discusses how, because of social, cultural, political, and intellectual constructions, humans struggle to assert their individuality.<sup>4</sup> We are all influenced by predisposed images that tell us what we should be, do or look alike. The reader will notice how, in the same way, Kundera's characters live the same experience. For example, Ludvik, in *The Joke* (1967) because of the Communist regime's impositions, feels like he can never be or act as he wants to. Here one could recall Roland Barthes and his works, such as *Mythologies* (1957) and *From Work to Text* (1977). In these works, he discussed how mass culture crushes factual reality by proposing natural and self-evident images or myths with ideological propositions while they are just *doxas*, public opinions or universal discourses. That is the subtle veil that divides the ideal from the real and blurs its lines even more, almost merging the preexisting image with reality. Kundera echoes this reading of norms and social acceptance that oppresses one's life and decisions. In *Immortality* (1990), for example, if one trespasses the rule or norm is punished or criticised. Agnes, while walking in the streets and covering her ears for the noise pollution, is judged by a passerby because, in his opinion, she had to undergo what every other surrounding person had to. Therefore, reality is influenced by society, politics and mass media, but also by others and, maybe most importantly, by ourselves. It becomes a willing or unwilling censorship of our being that targets the single individual and makes them live in a state of inauthenticity in favour of mass uniformity.

For this theme, this project will call on work by Jean Baudrillard, specifically his essay *Precession of Simulacra* (2009). He affirmed that in this "contemporary consumer society", everything is influenced by cultural discourse, leading to the birth of simulacra (image, figure; ghost, shadow; idea, representation) that blurs reality. He stated that, because of media simulations and a hyperreal society, the relationship between the sign, to the thing they signify has changed, making the signs take over the thing they signify. This world of simulacra, politically and socially imposed onto us to influence our idea of reality, has another cause: the creation of a simulated 'otherness', that makes the real thing evaporate. In other words, because of the need to catalogue or analyse, all otherness has been translated into terms, something void with the semblance of otherness

<sup>4</sup>See also Pirandello, Luigi. *Sei personaggi in cerca di autore*.

and simulacra. The hyperreality of the model overwhelms the reality of the people we live with, and consumer society provides a procession of a “parade of images that project a life that consumers are encouraged to try to live” (Baudrillard, 2009, 1482). Similarly, in *The Joke* (Kundera, 1967), an example of a culturally imposed mask is presented. Ludvík notices how the actions of a young officer seem scripted and acted out as if he were performing a play. His actions reminded Ludvík of a “young man playing a role” (98), transported in a “completed world [in which they] adapt forms, patterns, models [...] and enact them” (99), thus forcing him to a performance of a ready-made mask.

### 1.3 Novels and Chapter Organisation

The novels chosen for this analytical argumentation are *The Joke* (1967), *Immortality* (1990) and *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013). The selection of these three novels took place because of diverse reasons. First, they share a gap of twenty-three years from each other, in which years Kundera changed literature language and country. This significant period of time, almost seventy years, leads to the reason: *The Joke* (1967) is Kundera’s first-ever novel, which signals the start of this unique genre, the novel in variation. *Immortality* (1990) represents and is the realisation of his art of the novel. Finally, *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013), the most recently published work, might symbolise the perfection of the author’s lifetime project. Thus, all three have a peculiar and essential role in the purpose of this analytical and chronological argumentation. The research project is organised so that the evolution of Kundera’s philosophy about the self and *umorismo* can be easily depicted and perceived in every novel. In other words, this project has three main content chapters that will focus on *The Joke*, *Immortality* and *The Festival of Insignificance*, respectively. And in each, an analysis of the creation of identity and the role of *umorismo*, related to the theories of Pirandello and Baudrillard, will be made.

#### 1.3.1 *The Joke*

*The Joke* was completed on December 5th 1965, and it is the first ever written novel by Kundera and the only one published firstly in Czech. It was published only in 1967 and banned for the first time in 1968. It is an essential novel because it was written almost spontaneously when Kundera still had not created or moulded his conception and idea of the narrative genre. It is divided into seven parts, and it presents many digressions about the Czech Republic during the era of the country’s total control by the Communist Party used to explain the thoughts and sensations of the characters. Even if the main character is Ludvík, the novel gives space to every character so that diverse intellectual, social and cultural views, can be explored.

Ludvík believes that everyone sees him differently than how he sees himself. The gaze of the others creates this image of his persona that it becomes so shared that he cannot do anything to change it. He sends his friend Marketa a sarcastic message, even if intended as a joke, and he is punished and banned from the University and the Communist Party. Ludvík, throughout the novel, tries to find revenge and be uniform with the others by following the precepts that he disliked before. That is, to attempt to stay at the same pace of time.

However, in the end, he will learn that history and culture are too rapid for him to follow, and he will never be able to change or redirect his life.

In this research project, the analysis of *The Joke* will primarily focus on the character Ludvík and his relationship as both victim and oppressor of the gaze of the other. In particular, the reader will understand that since our observation of the world around us is limited by our personal and subjective lens, our interpretations of the other and the universe are more than inaccurate and could lead to one's disgrace. As a result, Kundera shows us that each individual not only lives the risk of being denied agency from the other but also reacts in a way that transforms his status from victim to oppressor. The theories of Pirandello and Baudrillard will be used to highlight the imposition of masks and roles, with any resemblance to the interiority of a person, e.g., deepness, by the gaze of society. An affiliation with de Beauvoir's essay, but read through van der Tuin's eyes, will unveil how Ludvík's behaviour does not regard the relationship with women but every other individual he meets. Thanks to Ludvík's interactions with the other characters the reader detects reality with all its complete ambiguity. Everyone has their truth, rooted in something void or lost, such as a simulacrum, which they try to impose onto others. However, everything loses its significance, and the reader (and characters) comes to recognise the relativity and uncertainty in which they live. Thus, as Pirandellian *umorismo*, Kundera can show the meditative process through the characters' thoughts, and by doing so, he can break down the veil of constructions or illusions masqueraded as reality.

### 1.3.2 *Immortality*

*Immortality* was completed in Czech in 1988 but published in French as *L'immortalité* only in 1990. Thus, it was published precisely twenty-three years after the first publication of *The Joke* (1967). It is probably the longest novel Kundera has written, and it does not present or put eminence on accounts of the Communist Era of Czechoslovakia. This novel is necessary for any understanding of his development and growth as a writer because it represents the fulfilment of his art of the novel: a novelistic reflection that provokes questions through a light-hearted non-seriousness. This novel is divided into seven chapters, and is polyphonic, allowing each character to display and depict their inner thoughts and opinions. The story appears to be divided into parallel, but often isolated, worlds for each character. The three most significant are Kundera as a character, the creation of Agnes from a single gesture of a stranger, and the interaction between the historical figures of Goethe and Hemingway.

The analysis in this chapter will concentrate on the concept of the image, more specifically on the immortal image left in posterity. It will be revealed how its creation is based on the gaze of the other, understood as one's environment: one's family and friends, society or culture and media impositions. The ideas from Pirandello and Baudrillard will assist and strengthen Kundera's existentialism, precisely for the easy alienability of self, and the abstraction of the image. The theories from Barthes will enter the discussion with the concept of norm and doxa since these impositions are given the value of only acceptable truth. Moreover, the use of different voices and the idea of the novel in variations will be resolved or uncovered as the superior exempla of Pirandello's *umorismo*: Kundera can disintegrate this impression of reality or simulacrum,

throughout the novel. The writing turns each scene, event, or something into a game, a paradox, but also creates space to help educate the reader on tolerance and comprehension of human frailties.

### 1.3.3 *The Festival of Insignificance*

*The Festival of Insignificance* is Milan Kundera's most recent novel. Written in French but first published in Italian as *La festa dell'insignificanza* in 2013, it does not present the typical long and detailed digressions of Kundera's earlier writing. It is a notable fact for this research project, for it is almost as if he decided to leave aside the deeper explanations since every microscopic occurrence relates to themes or scenes from his earlier novels. Structurally divided into seven parts, it presents the main characters and their ideas polyphonically and allows diverse views on the same theme to be exposed. The story is simple and presents four characters that meet and interact about life.

In this third content chapter, the analysis concerning the *Festival of Insignificance* will focus on the two main themes proposed above, which are the self and *umorismo*. This discourse will follow the characters as stemming points for discussion. More specifically, the different approach to identity creation and the denouncing of cultural imposition that, even if without meaning, affects people's behaviours. Just like the meaningless feather in the novel that floats on the ceiling and to which is given symbolic value. Here the connection between Jean Baudrillard's *Precession of Simulacra* (2009) and Pirandello's novels (1904 and 1926) will be glaring, precisely the constant attachment, thus the influence, to the roots of human culture; and the difference between interior and exterior self, respectively. Finally, Pirandello's *umorismo* and Kundera's style will have focus. Specifically, their ability to destroy or suspend the overwhelming masks, illusions and facades enforced by society.

With this research, the reader will comprehend Kundera's concept of the novel in variations and notice how it can relate to the entirety of Kundera's *oeuvre*. The recurring themes that confirm and regulate the unity of a novel, here exemplified by the self and *umorismo*, will unveil how this concept can expand its radius to the wholeness of a novelistic production. Moreover, thanks to the affiliation and relation to authors such as Pirandello and Baudrillard, the hope is to enlighten the reader on the relevance of Kundera for the affinity to this century's social implications. Hence, to propose a different reading of his novels so that the reader will only consider and, hopefully, appreciate the magnificent mosaic shaped by his individual yet interconnected novels.

## Chapter 2

### *Žert (The Joke)*

In this chapter, the focus of this analytical argumentation will be on Kundera's novel *The Joke* (1967). *Žert* was the first novel written by Milan Kundera, even if it does not sign his entrance into the world of literature. He had always written poetry and articles, but with *The Joke*, he started his journey with a genre he never again abandoned. Completed on December 5th 1965, and published in Czech in 1967, *Žert* is a crucial work for this analytical argumentation, for it presents essential factors for Kundera's conception of the novel. The purpose is to study the evolution of Kundera's themes. Specifically, the analytical focus towards detection of a development, difference or continuity of these motifs and whether his opera can be considered one whole novel in variations.

The first factor that signals *Žert*'s relevance for this argumentation is that it signals the emergence of Kundera as a novelist. Thus, the wellspring is visible in his passion for building a complete and personal conception of this genre: his art of the novel. It represents the source of Kundera's understanding or consideration of the significance of this genre, more precisely, the novel in variations. In the years that would follow, he would discuss the genre in diverse essays, such as *Art du roman* (1986), *Les testaments trahis* (1993), and *Une recontre* (2009). He states he was inspired by music, precisely musical variations. In jazz music, for example, if one listens carefully, one can find connections with the original. In fact, jazz music consists of alterations and repetitions of parts of melodies (*Testaments Betrayed*, 43). Kundera was also inspired by classical music and by Beethoven's ability to create diverse melodic, rhythmic or harmonic compositions without violating the primary essence of the theme (73). Thus, although variations are distinct, unity is guaranteed in their relation to the motif (*Encounter*, 159). Kundera, in a way very similar to Beethoven, wants to consider the same themes and stay in contact with several existential questions that are always at the centre of his interests and analysis. Thematic unity secures the coherence of the work of art (*Art of the Novel*, 38), and variations offer the opportunity to delve into the same theme, in sequence, from different angles (*Testaments Betrayed*, 81). In such a way, the novel becomes a meditation on existence by displaying diverse imaginary characters (*Art of the Novel*, 41).

The other factor that makes this novel meaningful is its adventure in the world of translation, particularly regarding its English adaptations. *The Joke* was translated five times in the span of the following twenty-three years (1969-1992), for translators preferred to adapt the novel to their and their society's

tastes. They reconstructed it completely, imposing modifications and erasures. In effect, *The Joke* became a different work with diverse significations and themes from *Žert*. This factor is worthy of notice, for it also starts a diverse discourse on Kundera's intentions with the novel. Many critics, such as Lakis Proguidis or Lucio Lombardo Radice, due to the presence of historical digressions about the Czech situation during the Communist Regime, considered it a political criticism, a literary howl against totalitarian regimes. These personal interpretations neglected to comprehend the actual content of *Žert*, that is, a depiction of a love story (Kundera, preface of the novel). Therefore, all the digressions about Communist Czechoslovakia are needed solely to depict the characters exhaustively. As Kundera will later write in *Art of the Novel* (1986), History is only relevant if it creates existential situations (21), which Kundera aims to depict.

This chapter aims to understand Kundera's deployment of two distinct themes in the novel: individuality and *umorismo*. The final intent is to detect whether *The Joke* (1967) can be considered the groundwork for Kundera's art of the novel, thus his idea and concept of the novel in variations.

First, it will be addressed how Kundera portrays humans in their fight against the image imposed onto them by the outside world. The aim is to understand how such representations serve as a (mis-)fit with concepts and ideas regarding the self. Moreover, a connection with authors such as Luigi Pirandello, Jean Baudrillard and Simone de Beauvoir will be undertaken. More specifically, their affiliation with the themes of existentialism, societal imposition and disappearance of things, and objectification of the other to create one's identity are at the heart of this analysis of Kundera's first novel.

Second, a link with Pirandellian *umorismo* will be made, specifically concerning the style and the purpose of the work of art. The goal is to see whether Kundera's comic style can be interpreted as Pirandello's "sentiment of the contrary" (*L'umorismo*, 126). More precisely, their shared understanding of humour is the disruption or breakdown of apparent constructions (157). The *umorista* knows that fictional narrations hold ideal stories and situations, so they dismantle them, and by doing so, they comprehend and teach compassion toward humans (148). This juxtaposition will hopefully help the future readers of Kundera not take his novels seriously but also detect from his humoristic situations any personal revelation.

### 2.0.1 General Overview of the Novel

In the novel, there is a limit to the action, and the characters and situations are explained through flashbacks. Structurally the work is divided into seven parts and is polyphonic: every character has a space for their monologues and anecdotes. However, most of the narrative is given to Ludvík, almost as if the others were functioning like mirrors to comprehend his figure. Nevertheless, a diverse grasp of the world is needed to create different experimental selves with other motives and beliefs from the protagonist. In effect, an exhaustive poetic meditation on existence is displayed (Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 19). Thus, the connection between the characters is achieved through their interactions, but most importantly, through their associations with the main topics of the novel.

Ludvík finds himself in his childhood town in Moravia, a place he had not

seen for years and was not even going to, if not for the occasion that demanded his presence. Everything started years ago because of a joke. It was a message sent to a woman he fancied that was supposed to be ironic: “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvík” (*The Joke*, 36). However, it ended up being the cause for his expulsion from the Communist Party for accusations of Trotskyism and intellectualism. For this reason, the protagonist was sentenced to a work camp in Ostrava, a prison for everyone considered an enemy of the Party. Ludvík clings to his past and the hatred towards Zemanek, the leading hand behind his expulsion. Now, after many years, he is in his childhood town in Moravia, finally able to commit his revenge on his comrade by sleeping with his wife, Helena. Ludvík, Helena and Zemanek are not the only characters in the novel. They share the narrative with others, such as Lucie, Jaroslav and Kostka. All commune through their interactions, but most importantly, through concatenations of the same themes.

The essential motifs discussed in *The Joke* (1967) are the battle between human beings and history. In this existential fight, history will reveal itself as a lifetime, e.g., the past of a person, others, society and cultural impositions that act like a straitjacket to restrict people’s agency while they attempt to assert their identity. In this novel, every character deceives themselves in their own way. Factual truth does not exist, and everyone acts accordingly to their subjective view, for it is the only known and believed in certitude. However, these answers to existential queries mask external precepts without absolute reality. More specifically, their roots in external models, experiences, beliefs and cultural impositions of these truths are unveiled. For example, Jaroslav adheres to the myths and legends, Kostka follows Christian doctrine, Helena clings to the Communist party, and Zemanek is everchanging and adapting. Finally, Ludvík will have different meditations thanks to his interaction with them. And in the end, these concepts and interactions will reveal the human struggle between reality and image, real life and imagination, and truth and ideal.

## 2.1 The Analysis

### 2.1.1 Ludvík

Ludvík is central to four parts of the novel and is the point of connection between all the characters. Throughout *The Joke* (1967), he struggles with the difference between private and public life, inner and external self. Hence, he considers his thoughts and ideas distinct and antagonistic to societal and cultural impositions. The perfect example is depicted in Part Four, in which Ludvík meets his old friend Jaroslav. While listening to a series of songs, which Jaroslav considered the “tunnel beneath History” (152), Ludvík denounces and critiques them for their “pandering too much of prevailing tastes” (165). He explains in more detail when he compares those to the most known and famous writers and historians and how they could survive the passage of time. Ludvík believes there is also a “hierarchy” concerning the dead, where at the top, one can find symbols and emblems which overshadow the rest. Because of the difficulty of reshaping their works to be better connected with their time, they

failed to enter into this “propaganda gallery of heroes” (177). Even if Jaroslav is described as a man who believes in the original authenticity of the past, both he and Ludvík will understand that not only has the authentic truth of tradition disappeared but also how its “comforting flow” (166) only represents an “escalation of the true, [...] resurrection of the figurative when the object and substance have disappeared” (Baudrillard, *Precession of Simulacra*, 1487). Thus, the predominance of the sign comes to dominate the things they signify in this new consumeristic, material and meaningless world. Ludvík investigates his past actions realising how he joined the Party to stay near the “wheel of history” (*The Joke*, 81), ergo to be part of something bigger, a “collective entity” (50). A way to direct and create history and not be trapped under it. However, after the episode of the joke, and the many accusations of being a different person based on circumstances, he recognises he does not own any power over the course of his story.

He is just a puppet waiting to be manipulated: factual reality does not exist, and truth and life are made of backgrounds and sets, almost like a drama before an artificial scene (14). He comprehends how youth is just a scene made for children in costume and that history and life are only the playground for these immatures with factitious and imposed passions and poses that reach the value of reality (100). Here the connection with Baudrillard (2009) is truly obvious to the reader. Because of enforced culturally produced hyperreal needs, the image prevails over the real, and the natural state becomes obliterated by culture. The demands are no longer instinctive needs that humans need to satisfy but simulacra. They are turned into culturally produced necessities used to convince and impose on consumers to attempt to live this void life projected by a parade of images (*Precession of Simulacra*, 1482). In effect, the form of the person starts to metamorphose and take different shapes. Ludvík apprehends how he has a thousand different faces, different masks that are real and that at the same time do not fit him properly (*The Joke*, 34). He knows that he acts differently based on the circumstances: with the Party, Ludvík is motivated, enthusiastic and full of sentiment; with women, he is introverted, goofy and completely ironic.

However, because of the many people believing in his expulsion, the image of his individualistic self prevailed over his actual self. His form became more truthful than him, so he also starts believing them, for he could not imagine “that the Revolution itself, the spirit of the times might be wrong and [him], an individual, might be right” (*The Joke*, 32). He felt like there was a difference, a split between the person he was and what he should be, according to the Party. He could not understand what his actual self was because of the confusion of the thousand faces imposed on him, so he “grasped [his] way clumsily among them” (34). His image supersedes his reality. The reader understands that his punishment in the prison camp is as much about his self-recognition of the masks that dominate how the world perceives him; as it is about the future development of his behaviour toward others. Even there, he tries to denounce his innocence regarding intellectualism and cynicism, but his voice is not heard, for “there was no power capable of changing the image of [his] person” (56). His image was more truthful than his inner self, and it was he “who was guilty of the non-resemblance” (57) between his form and his interiority. This idea is psychologically interesting: Ludvík, in Ostrava, lives the struggle of being crushed by external forces. However, maybe as a defensive mode to not be oppressed again, his relationship with the others mirrors the abuse he endured

in the camps. In effect, the victim becomes the abuser by not allowing others agency.

At this point, one must highlight a connection with Luigi Pirandello. In his work *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (1929), his protagonist Vitangelo discovers the difference between what one is for himself and what is for others. Pirandello considers humans puppets representing a form, a facade without any inner world or meaning. Ludvík, like Vitangelo, understands how he can have different identities based solely on the owner of the gaze. Foremost, these impositions create doubts in the mind of both protagonists, leaving them with a sense of uncertainty in life. Ludvík wants to take revenge on Zemanek: he wants to be able to direct his life story and his identity. He states that his revenge over Pavel Zemanek will be a beautiful destruction. He will be able to demolish the stage sets imposed on his life. Thus, his understanding of the act of demolition is related to an effort to impose a form of will on the course of his life history, to be able to create and direct his history by trying to “act as a stage manager” (Kundera, *The Joke*, 1967) of his life play.

### 2.1.2 Zemanek

Ludvík’s revenge is towards Pavel Zemanek, the main reason for Ludvík’s expulsion from the Party and the university. This character is relevant, for it is an example of how Ludvík does not allow the agency of the other and imposes masks, with the value of truth, on people around him. However, when Ludvík meets him years later at the Ride of the Kings, he cannot believe how Zemanek has changed. His views and ideals are all connected with his former ones: he had abandoned them and metamorphosed into a different man. As a result of the transformation, Ludvík and Zemanek share agreements about their worldviews, and there is a possibility of restoring their friendship. Pavel changed as times marched on (*The Joke*, 291). For Ludvík, it is a sign that his revenge can only ever end in failure. Zemanek appreciates the attitude of the new generation towards the past. He believes their disinterest in history and words represents a pressure to experience freedom and not reject old orders as their world. Opposed to him, Ludvík sees this behaviour as an ignorant way, through passions, loves, and interests, to differentiate themselves from the older generation (296). Thus, a list of ideals or likes and dislikes that are supposed to create the “manifesto of a generation” (296), come in the form of only a “parade of images, or cultural hyperreal needs that overwhelm one’s life” (Baudrillard, *Precession of Simulacra*, 1482). More precisely, this fact, the changing of Zemanek’s beliefs, and the turmoil in Ludvík’s soul, regards not only his relationship with history but also for his relationship with identity. For years Ludvík had been thinking about Zemanek in this petrified form, “the form in which [he] had last seen him” (Kundera, *The Joke*, 294), precisely when he expelled Ludvík from the Party.

After years of ruminating on the events that came out of the joke, Ludvík realises that he based his identity on hating the idea or image he made of Zemanek. Now, finding him changed, Ludvík does not know how to act, and he finds it arduous to decipher himself without the hatred for Zemanek. Thus, Ludvík needs to hate Pavel because he cannot lose those thirty-seven years of life that signed himself and his identity (299). However, even if he tries to impose his will on Zemanek’s actions, like deciding that in case of an apology,

he will not accept it, Ludvík will not be able to fulfil his desires. In fact, he is left alone with the love of a woman he does not want. Thanks to this incident, Ludvík understands that he is not the subject of his life history and cannot act as a “stage manager”. He recognises that he is not the subject of his story but its object (136). He does not have decisive power over the events of his life because of the influence of external intrusions. The reality is that hostile history continually invades people’s lives from the outside and destroys them.

Furthermore, Ludvík understands that his present life has been shadowed by his reality: his past. He has always tried to decipher and change it. However, through a focus on the time gone by, he realises he cannot impose his will on the present. The metaphor used in the novel perfectly explains this concept. Ludvík imagines being on a moving walkway, which represents time, running in the opposite direction. Because he is obsessed with the past, he cannot move forward. In effect, because history and life lead to forgetting, “everything will end up being schematic signs revoked of any meaning” (312). What will remain will be the *nostalgia* for something that is forever lost.

### 2.1.3 Lucie

Ludvík is described as someone engaged in a continuous search for meaning and the depths behind things. Every time a situation presents itself, he does a lot of self-critical investigations. Concerning the difference between image and reality, Ludvík understands their antagonism when he meets Lucie after many years. She was his beloved while he was in the work camps, and after their aggressive and sad last encounter, Ludvík had never seen her again. Their meeting starts a spiral of thoughts in Ludvík’s mind, precisely related to the difference between who Lucie is for him and who she is for herself. He does not initially recognise Lucie, for he remembers her as an abstract body that was part of his life, a misty legend that had been part of his life. Like Pirandello’s *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (1926), *The Joke* (1967) conveys the diversity between how one sees their self and how others do. The gaze of the other develops a mask and attaches it to the person, for it does not recognise the inner part of the self. This chaos can lead to extreme confusion about the authentic self and its complete annulment. Hence, one can reach an identity only if seen by others. However, these masks or forms are abstract ideas that individuals can create and to which they give the value of truth. Ludvík understands that not only others attached to him a distorted mask or image of his identity but that he is the first person who did not allow others to be themselves. Ludvík describes Lucie as a legend, a myth, a goddess of escape and mist. Her abstraction is the cause of Ludvík’s view of her identity, which is bound to the situation in which they met. Thus, in a way, she became the mirror reflecting his “lyrical age” (*The Joke*, 272). In fact, at that time, he was only investigating himself, and he needed her solely for that recognition. Here, de Beauvoir and her myth of the eternal feminine enter easily into the discussion.

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir discusses how, in a patriarchal society, women are relegated to a whole group without any differentiation. Their objectification and relegation into the role of the ‘Other’ is what denied them subjectivity. Thus, the woman is considered a myth, a mystery figure that is not allowed selfhood. She appears without substance: a dream that comes into realisation only in a relationship with men. In *The Joke* (1967), Ludvík rel-

egates Lucie to this abstract state because the love that he feels for this woman is not for her in herself, but “the side of herself she turns towards [him], what she is for [him]” (182). Ludvík has always treated Lucie as an abstract myth, a mystery that did not need discovery. He used her to investigate himself, and she became “a function of [his] own situation; everything that went beyond that concrete situation, everything that she was in herself, had escaped [him]” (271). Thus, he was never able to know her. For example, he has always read their ugly last encounter as her being a prude or not having any will to have intercourse with him. However, Ludvík later learns that Lucie was raped when she was little (245). Her relationship with sex and the body is different because of her trauma. In a sort of master and slave dialectics, Ludvík uses the abstract form of Lucie, her essence of myth and legend, to reflect his identity.

As de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* (1949), the woman is positioned in the objectified other, becoming the mirror for the man’s image. The figure of Lucie internalised the absolute otherness, acting as an affirmation of the man’s consciousness. She is “the mirror that preserved [his] image of those days” (Kundera, *The Joke*, 272), his lyrical age. Thus, the period in which a man is too concerned with himself, for “a man is too great a riddle to himself” (272), to be troubled or interested in the riddles of others. Hence, Ludvík used the others as “walking mirrors” in which he was able to “find his own emotions, his own worth” (272). De Beauvoir (1949) affirms that women are trapped in a dialectic of mastery and servitude with men, in which the woman is needed to embody the role of an objectified other to let the man define himself as a subject. In this case, as Iris van der Tuin did in her essay (2018), one must reflect that this can be considered a radical form of thinking equality, thus the norm to keep juxtaposing female and male domains. One should be thinking difference, creating a female standard based on reciprocity. For this reason, I do acknowledge the thoughts and ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, but for the consequent rivalry between women, the choice is not to accept it as the desired type of Feminism.<sup>5</sup> So, one must realise that Ludvík, because of his patriarchal culture, puts Lucie in a lower position than himself. However, for this research and to eradicate gender opposition, the discourse lies in existential diversity between one another, exemplified by Ludvík’s behaviour towards everyone. Ludvík was too focused on himself and on his will to have sex that he failed to read the person that was standing in front of him. She almost resembles an open book, while he comes to represent a self-centred illiterate with no interest in reading.

#### 2.1.4 Helena

Ludvík also has a disfigured view of the character Helena, subjected to comparison with Lucie. This juxtaposition leads Ludvík to create a concept of rupture between body and soul, pose and persona. Helena is very straightforward and presents herself with a list of likes and dislikes, little pieces of a puzzle that create her personality. However, this mosaic is only an interpretation of personality, which indicates a self-made image or mask. In a way, the idea that Helena has of her true personality is only abstract, a *simulacrum*, some generic miniaturisations that, as Baudrillard says, are only produced from units and

<sup>5</sup>See Van der Tuin, Iris. “The Arena of Feminism: Simone du Beauvoir and the History of Feminism.” *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*. Eds Rosemarie Buikema, Liedeke Plate and Kathrin Thiele. Routledge, 2018. (pp. 9-23).

models (*Precession of Simulacra*, 1484). Helena has always passionately clung to the Party in her private and public life. She does not know how to oppose them, for she considers life one and indivisible. One of her first statements is that she wants to live a whole life and continue being herself, with her likes and dislikes, and not cut it in the middle (Kundera, *The Joke*, 19). The main reason to accept Ludvík's company in Moravia is his appearance as part of her youth "returning from the shadows" (28). Because of his discourses, she could feel the echoes of the Liberation coming from the past, her ideals and tastes that were free to be and not altered. Thus, she felt like she could "remain whole from the beginning to end" (27). Her relationship with Ludvík is created only for the sake and memory of her youth (29). On the conception of unity between private and public life, Helena does not perceive any difference: her conduct is influenced by both her exteriority and interiority.

However, for her "capacity for transforming reality into a likeness of desires and ideals" (203), Ludvík realises she is more aware of her pose than her person. Helena's identity is subjected to the preference of body over soul because the former is more honest than the latter. Her predilection for the pose or form assumes the absolute value of reality to the extent of making her believe that their intercourse signified the merging of their souls and bodies. Thus, the act represents the truthful essence of their love. In opposition to Helena's sentiments, it is clear that Ludvík used this chance to complete an "act of demolition" (14). He enjoyed the intercourse only when his eyes became the ones of the absent person, i.e., Zemanek's. In fact, when Ludvík notices his revenge was unsuccessful, he is disgusted by her and tries to avoid her at every opportunity. In a way, Helena is a victim of rape by Ludvík's treatment of her persona, i.e., as an object of his desires and personal achievements.

In addition, her name needs consideration. From the Greek *helos*, solar splendour, it already owns an interpretation, for it recalls one of the most famous characters of the *Iliad*: Helen. Perhaps on purpose, perhaps on accident, the use of this name reveals diverse understandings of Helena's role as an object. As Helena in Kundera's novel, Helen, the daughter of Tyndareus, has always been an object and a victim of others. Her father used her as an object of exchange to guarantee aid to his city if needed. Alexander used her to gain favour in the royal family and the international context. He could steal goods from Sparta and take them to Troy without needing to drench with blood hands. In this regard, it is necessary to mention his war cry since it echoed the words "For Helen and the goods!". Moreover, in Euripides' version, Helen never went to Troy. Instead, an *eidolon* (a *simulacrum*) took her place by the will of Zeus, for his capricious will to dictate human lives. Nonetheless, pivotal is how her character or image is used as an object to achieve something, that is, to further a male-centric agenda. No one will ever know Helen's identity, but everyone will remember her as the reason for the fall of Troy.

Therefore, Helen becomes a symbol: she embodies a role. Admittedly, it needs to be indicated that in the Bronze Age, it was customary to put things on personal terms<sup>6</sup> since it was more acceptable in the eyes of the Gods. However, Helen's representation throughout the years has never considered this fact with the effect of reducing political hostility to a love conflict. She became the portrayal and symbol of destruction, even if she happens to be the victim. An

<sup>6</sup>See, Strauss, Barry S. *The Trojan War: A New History*. Arrow, 2008.

example is her epitome: referred to as Helen of Troy, even if she is Greek. She came to embody the cause of the fall of Ilios just like Helena came to represent Ludvík's revenge towards Zemanek. The women are denied agency and are posited and oppressed in the role of the objectified other to mediate in the affirmation of the male consciousness.

### 2.1.5 The Gaze of Ludvík

To recapitulate, the differences between Helena and Lucie are easily perceivable as a discussion between the impositions of society and the concept of the viability of the self. Their juxtaposition opens the meditations about private and public life, interiority and exteriority, body and soul, pose and person. On one hand, Helena believes in the conjunction between her private and public life. She thinks that her self is subject to public judgment. Thus, through lists of likes and dislikes and her favouring the body over the soul, she depends on a pinpoint list that she considers can constitute her identity. On the other hand, Lucie appears as an abstract figure, for her true self is hidden from the eyes of others. Her soul and private life are detached from her pose or public life, and she remains truthful to her privacy by living ahistorically. In fact, she does not know anything about contemporary concerns: she lives for her own small and eternal ones. She is disgusted by the body and believes in a non-corporeal love that does not need the physical touch.

Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that Helena and Lucie are both subjected to Ludvík's gaze, which transforms them into caricatures, images that represent his interpretation of them. In effect, they both represent a role, an image imposed onto them. Ludvík does not know how they are in themselves, for he has only interpreted them and used them for his purposes. He has never known Helena, for during their interactions, he was only thinking about her role as Zemanek's wife. He focused on planning his revenge and did not allow her to be read as she intended. Ludvík thought she was worth pursuing only when she could incarnate the symbol of his redressing the wrongs done to him during his life. Only when she remained in that land of mystery and myth, in the incorporeal abstract in exactly the same way as Lucie, could such an abstract exercise work. As mentioned above, Ludvík had never known Lucie, and he finds out about her life only thanks to his friend Kostka, who met Lucie years later. He understands that, during their encounters, he did not allow Lucie to reveal her subjectivity. She was only a "function of [his] own situation" (*The Joke*, 271), the mirror that preserved his lyrical age, which allows him to investigate himself. He did not know her for what she was in and for herself, for she was bound to the situation in which they fell in love. Thus, he relegated her to the "incorporeal abstract", a myth (182), a mystery for him and to herself, never heard: an enigma.

Hence, Ludvík understands how the actual self is the hidden, disguised one. He recognises his role in the situation: an impediment to the women's agency. However, by following van der Tuin's discourse (2018), the argument shifts from the impediment to the woman to one of the genderless individuals, for she is not the only person who does not allow agency. All the characters in *The Joke* (1967) function precisely for Ludvík's identity and revelations, all positioned in the objectified role of mirrors. Thus, the characters are needed for what they represent, for the role in which they are defined. Their selves, just like any

other, are only conceivable through a particular situation, such as Lucie's past life or Helena and Zemanek's unexpected behaviour.

## 2.2 Conclusion

*The Joke* (1967) emphasises the moments of reflection of the characters to break down the illusion, ideal fiction or appearance of reality (Pirandello, *L'umorismo*, 1908). Thus, the connection with Pirandello's essay (1908) is evident. The moments of meditation are of fundamental importance, for they are more concerned with both the shadow and the body, reflecting the effects of the thinking and acting process. Kundera reveals reality in its ambiguity, and things lose their meanings. *Umorismo* is used to depict this moral ambiguity, this relativity, the realisation that there are no certainties.

Another essential point is how *The Joke* (1967) expresses the struggle human beings have when identities are created. The effort to assert those identities results from cultural and societal impositions that tarnish one's truth or view of reality. All the characters in the novel are assigned a form, an image with the value of reality, which ends up revealing itself as an abstract void of any meaning. Jaroslav sees the truth in the myths of tradition, and Helena clings to the Party as a two-way street, as if her life depended on it and as if the Party's life depended on her. Zemanek is the perfect example of inauthenticity because he follows the tastes and likes of an everchanging society not to be defined by his generation. Lastly, Lucie seems the one who is more truthful to herself because she disappears behind all the thoughts of others. However, the reader will never know the real identity of the characters, what they are tied to, or truly be able to peer into their souls. The reader is denied that privilege. Every character is relegated to the role, the form that functions to create another identity: Ludvík. Hence, the theme regarding the self is its quarrel with external forces, such as society, culture, religion, or one's history, to form individuality. Every character fights to present their truth, which they believe represents the factual one. In particular, the deliberations focus on the opposition between public and private life. In the end, this antithesis will mutate or develop its meaning into the antagonism between the inner and exterior self. Thus, everyone owns their truth, and reality, factual truth independent from influences, does not exist. Because of this, one lives in a state of uncertainty and doubt, and to not wander into a black void, they attach themselves to something bigger, considered socially accepted, such as cultural discourses.

On this theme, the reader can observe a solid connection between the novel's literary strategies and the works of Baudrillard and Pirandello. It is worth noting that Baudrillard, in his *Precession of Simulacra* (2009), states how culture, the sign, has replaced nature, the real. In this way, cultural discourses tell human beings what they want and impose images representing a life they are encouraged to live. The characters depicted by Kundera process their relation to the world only through these images, *simulacra* without any deepness. This confusion about factual reality leads to the unpredictability and struggle of identity creation, and Pirandellian existentialism perfectly adapts to Kundera's novel. Ludvík, as Vitangelo in Pirandello's *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (1927) discovers how everyone has many faces, forms and poses based on blurred views imposed on our *persona* by the other's or society's gaze. Poses or images over-

shadow the inner self, reaching the absolute value of reality. Their difference resides in where they attribute the value of truth to their identities. Helena's conception of identity does not separate her private (soul) and public (body) life since she can only act as she feels (*The Joke*, 26). On the other hand, Lucie appears ungraspable and ineffable. Her self is connected to her interiority, and she hides behind a mysterious veil that hides her actual self. However, it is Ludvik who must bear the responsibility for not allowing others to achieve agency and identity. In his relationship with Zemanek, Helena, and mainly with Lucie, he imposes objective roles onto them to affirm his identity. Zemanek is needed in his role of oppressor and tied to his former beliefs because Ludvik's identity is based on those thirty-seven years spent hating him and planning revenge. Helena is needed for revenge, only when she represents the possibility to redeem and rewrite Ludvik's own history.

The struggle of humans to achieve their personality is conditioned by external forces that try to impose their realities onto them. However, history and cultural discourses, not only oppress the persona but also challenge each character as they try to assert individual identities. Ludvik's gaze becomes the personification of cultural and societal discourse and the external force that jinks one's creation of the self with its uncertainty. As Baudrillard (2009) says, *nostalgia* assumes complete meaning, *nostalgia* for something factual that is lost, thus replaced with images, forms, and *simulacra* without any deepness or meaning. Moreover, just like any other character in Pirandellian art and the concepts in Baudrillard's *Precession of Simulacra* (2009), Ludvik realises that it is not the subject who imposes their code of fictitious reality onto real life. It is the real and the cultural discourses that impose their allegoric condition on the ever-interpreting subject.



## Chapter 3

# *L'Immortalité* (*Immortality*)

In this chapter, *Immortality* (1990) will be considered. In particular, the discourse will focus on two key points: the concept of the self and Kundera's use of the novel. Furthermore, to better comprehend the idea of the novel in variations, the depiction and explanation of the characters will be made by association with the themes of this research project, i.e., the creation of the self and *umorismo*. Thus, since the motifs are related, elucidated and presented through the character's gazes and points of view, this research will not follow the novel's structure, for it would not assist the analytical argumentation.

The concept of self and its fight with its depiction given by others, i.e., image, will be considered. The purpose is to comprehend and portray the author's beliefs regarding the self and confirm their affiliation with three well-known theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard, Luigi Pirandello and Roland Barthes. In particular, their concepts about image, *doxa* and existentialism, respectively.

Finally, investigating Kundera's style and ideas on the novel genre will prove the affiliation between Kundera's poetic and Pirandellian *umorismo*. That is, the "sentiment of the contrary" (*L'umorismo*, 126), that emerges gradually from a visible meditation.

### 3.0.1 General Overview of the Novel

*Nesmrtelnost*, previously written in Czech and concluded in 1988, was published as *Immortalité* in France in 1990. Thus, it was written twenty-three years after his first novel, *The Joke* (1967), in a completely different environment. While reading, one can notice how the story takes place in France and its connection to French literature's meditative style and interlocutory gaze. Moreover, *Immortality* (1990) demonstrates a merging or synthesis of Kundera's novelistic way, that is to say, the concern for anthropologic, philosophic and societal queries through a lightweight narration. In fact, in a note from the author, on the 1993 Czech edition, Kundera states that *Immortality* might be the realisation of his art of the novel, considering that it develops as a 'novelistic reflection' or discourse with the reader that provokes, inquires and investigates through ludic lightness, to reflect the characters as living beings as well as echos

of diverse novelistic European episodes. Regarding the *fabula*, it is reduced to a *minimum*, pivoting more toward novelistic meditation. It unfolds throughout two main parallel narrations depicting imaginary and historical characters accordingly.

The first appears as a story inside the story, for it presents two narratives which, even if intertwined, are almost autonomous. The two protagonists are the novelist Kundera and Agnes, the main character of Kundera’s new novel. Albeit Agnes looks like the portrayal of a figure invented by the novelist, that is, she owns her narrative, the protagonists, in the last chapter, will eventually end up living in the same tale.

The second narration shows interactions and meditations on the theme of immortality and identity between Goethe and Hemingway while in their posterity. Both authors are known for their contributions and imprint on the literary and philosophic world. Goethe, a German writer who lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is well known for combining literature with philosophy, which developed into an almost independent subject. Hemingway, who lived in the twentieth century, is considered one of the fathers of American literature and is famous for his iceberg theory, which is the concentration of the story on a few facts, leaving the operation of symbolism and the supporting structure out of sight.

Structurally divided into seven parts, *Immortality* (1990) concerns the characters in an acausal development. However, the two stories merge, for the relationship between these elements is secured for solid internal thematic relations. In turn, a novel within a novel is authored. The themes that tie these episodes are meditative reflections about identity, image and individuality. From there, the author portrays the doubts about what it means to be human in this existential trap that is the world. Moreover, through the diverse points of view of the characters, the author displays different meditations and reflections that, consequently, reveal or highlight the central motif. Thus, even if while reading, it might feel like fluctuating and wavering from one episode to another, if attention is paid, all of these will eventually turn out to be the beautiful mosaic that is Immortality.

## 3.1 The Analysis

### 3.1.1 The Novelist

Agnes can be considered the main protagonist since the whole novelistic meditation takes form from her, particularly from a gesture by a woman seen by the novelist Kundera. The gesture is inferred as the Latin ‘behaviour, mode of action, to perform’, that is, performing a feeling or emotion as communication. In the novel (1990), the gesture is depicted as a smile with an “unexpected [...] easy and flowing” (46) wave that looks like someone who playfully tosses “a brightly coloured ball to her lover” (7). The character of Agnes uses this gesture when she does not know what to say when words cannot describe the feelings she occurs to have inside (12). Nonetheless, the novelist states he was impressed by this gesture because it was not proper of the person, almost as if it lived outside of time (8) and gave him a sense of *nostalgia* (11). This *nostalgia* made him understand that gestures do not characterise us and are not unique

or individual of the designed person but are universal and use our bodies as incarnations (12). That is to say, because of the vast population, we cannot have unique and individual gestures, and, in a way, it is gestures that create individuals and not the contrary.

### 3.1.2 Agnes

The character of Agnes also shares this understanding about gestures. She learns that the gesture, which she thought belonged to only herself, is also used by the friend of her father and her sister Laura. Besides, Agnes has always believed that the governance of the world is in the hands of a program of the Creator's computer (Kundera, 1990, 16), which, left by God, runs by itself. For this reason, she believes that humankind comes from prototypes, mannequins without essence, and void sculptures. In effect, the only thing that distinguishes us, almost like some car serial number, is our faces and names (17). She realises that if someone knows her by her name or face, signifies they do not know her. For her essence, interiority and individuality are by no means connected with the figure of her outside: her idea of the self is detached from her body or image. Through her own words, she discusses this idea, taking as an example a postponed mirror stage at forty years old. If she were to look at herself in the mirror for the first time at that stage of adult life, after years of believing the face as “an outer reflection of what is inside”, she would see the “face of a stranger” (41). Thus, the realisation that “face is not [her]” (42), and that her body does not resemble her self makes her interiority constantly in contrast with her exteriority.

Furthermore, in Part 5, entitled *The Chance* (Kundera, 1990), Agnes understands how the distance she feels toward her body is shame and humiliation (276) because her very own body represents something that, in effect, does not belong to her. That is the existential trap everyone must live in: identity is determined by external conditions, larger forces that give unwanted roles or personalities, as tabloid pictures ready to capture a moment and interpret it freely. Agnes also meditates on the fact that the eyes of God and his judgment, because of his disappearance, have been replaced by cameras, news and media that transport the property of the identity of every individual to the eyes of others. That is to say, the life of everyone can be “filed away to be used” (36) against them, for it is open to interpretation and misunderstanding. Everyone is at the mercy of everyone else with the risk of being “haunt[ed by images] like a badly buried dead” (40), for they are easily accessible and too prone to be misleading. For this reason, the looks and gazes “were like weights that pressed her down to the ground, or like kisses that sucked her strength; [and] needles which etched the wrinkles in her face” (35). Agnes feels that she can be herself only when she does not represent an image, when no one is looking, in the absence of a glance which is solitude. And she believes the perfect universe would be a land where no one has a face, and everyone is their own creation (52). The absence of faces equals the lack of image, of the oppressive gaze that makes the individual act as if they were playing a role. This concept is relevant to Kundera's philosophy because it gives importance and purpose to the inner and hidden parts of the self.

### 3.1.3 Laura

Agnes is the opposite of her sister Laura. Their polarity is shown through a variety of means, but the most glaring one is the different usage of the same dark glasses. While Agnes wants to appear mysterious, ineffable and ungraspable, Laura displays them as part of her melancholic identity to let people know she cried (*Immortality*, 106). Therefore, the first identifies herself with her inner self and the idea that no one will fully comprehend her. While the second connects her identity with her body and image as a reflection of her insides. If Agnes believes that her appearance is something to be ashamed of since it does not belong to her, Laura considers her body more than a reflection in the mirror but her whole identity. In this way, her self emerges only through the eyes and the recognition of others.

The theme of the construction of uniqueness and individuality, allows Kundera to meditate on the role of the two sisters, declaring two methods of captivating their singularity. Laura makes herself visible by adding attributes to herself, such as ideas, concerns or beliefs, attempting to identify with them (Kundera, 1990, 114). Opposed to her, Agnes wants to subtract everything external from her, trying to come closer to her inner self. At this point, it is significant to point out that Agnes expresses ideas about “non-reality” that mirror Baudrillard’s (2009). That is the concept of the disappearance of factual truth and the emergence of imposed *simulacra* by media and society that are imposed on us, leading to the belief that there is no way to discern the real from its “artificial resurrection” (*Precession of Simulacra*, 1484). Because the real is replaced by signs, something void without origin and reality, considered “miniaturised units”, a “product of the irradiating synthesis of combinatory models”, or *simulacra*, the hyperreality of the model overwhelms the reality of the people. Agnes feels detached from the other women in her life because she does not act or think like them. In this case, I will argue that the other women embody Baudrillard’s conception of the sign (2009) and Barthes’ idea of *doxa* or the colossal force of mass imposition (1957). At this point, the connection between Agnes and Baudrillard (2009) is glaring. Agnes thinks humans come from prototypes and are without essence, all following a norm. For this reason, Agnes needs to be alone, without the gazes of others, without any imposition.

The perfect metaphor to explain the difference in their behaviour is given in Part Five, *The Chance*, where Kundera (1990) defines road and route. While the first is continuous, meaning that every piece of that landscape is worth contemplating, the second appears to be mechanic, a line that connects two points and has no meaning, but only at the reached destination (249). Laura’s soul is like a route: she wants to identify strongly with ideals, images and her body, considering her identity like a pinpoint list that needs to be completed role by role. Here Pirandello needs to enter the discussion. In *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (1926) Vitangelo notices how everyone, just like Laura, is focused on going forward as a bicycle or horse race as if that passage from role to the role could give them definition. However, in the end, they found “their own cart; they had harnessed themselves to it with a vast deal of patience, and were now engaged in drawing it after them”. Opposed to them, Vitangelo – and this applies to the role and reactions of Agnes – “drew no cart, and bore, [...], neither bridle nor blinders; [they] could certainly see farther than [the others]” (*Uno, nessuno e centomila*, 21) even if that led them to the doubt of the self.

Agnes understands that the unbearable of life is trying to be oneself instead of just being, which is the moment that actual happiness begins (Kundera, 1990, 287). Her method of creating her identity, subtraction, is the concept of becoming nature, of just being and not having the preoccupation of being whom and what. “Being: becoming a fountain, a fountain on which the universe falls like warm rain” (288). Also in this case, Pirandello (1926) enters the discussion since he believes that nature has found the truthful essence of being by not questioning its identity: a tree is just a tree. Thus, to survive this existential trap, the uncertainty of the self that affects people’s life one must live like a road. One must appreciate every episode or piece of landscape that presents itself and not run a route looking for conclusions or finalities. For “life knows no conclusion. Nor does it know anything of names”. One needs to be, as nature does, as the “tree, cloud; the book [we] read”. Living without doubts, inquiries and uncertainties, ergo just being: “living wholly without, a vagabond” (*Uno, nessuno e centomila*, 312).

### 3.1.4 Trespassing the Common Norm

As Baudrillard (2009) considered these images only a precession of *simulacra*, that is, void substance without meaning, Kundera (1990) reinforces this conception by denouncing the rise of imagology. He believes that as opposed to ideology, where people still had control over their reality, imagology replaced personal truths with whatever dictates the norm people must follow or obey. Imagology does not put knowledge and thought in motion: it freezes it, stopping the wheel of history. This concept is better explained through Kundera’s writing and metaphor of the stage (*Immortality*, 1990). He describes ideology as a set of operative “wheels at the back of the stage” responsible for the breeding of wars, revolutions or reforms. Due to their meeting, conflicts and exchanges, each ideology could occupy “a whole epoch with its thinking”, allowing the germination of others. Opposed to ideology, the set of wheels behind imagology does not influence or affect the course of history, it does not impose one thing onto the other, but it “organises peaceful alteration of its systems in lively seasonal rhythms” (132). This concept must be connected with Baudrillard’s essay (2009) and precisely the “parade of images that project a life that consumers are encouraged to try to live” (1482). The influence of cultural discourses, and here I will add imagology, leads to a blurred reality, an interpretation that influences the individual’s personal view of truth, immersing them in the same black and hot cauldron as the others.

Furthermore, by adapting to these culturally imposed images, one can never know who they are, what they want, how to act or, more importantly, how they cannot for fear of judgment. A judgment, which could be true or untrue, and, nonetheless, might stain one’s personality and life immortally, just like a scarlet letter of madness. Both Kundera (1990) and Pirandello (1926) show how by trespassing on socially acceptable behaviours by being outside of society, one can be considered to be crazy. Agnes notices this when she is walking down the street and, because of the noise pollution, she covers her ears. A man, bewildered by this action, determines she is a mad woman. Resonating on this fact, Agnes understands that the man was disturbed by her gesture. He “was censuring her” for her behaviour was outside the norm, that is, the custom of the place, the habit of hearing mechanical sounds of their everyday Parisian life.

Agnes was reproved “for refusing to undergo what everyone must undergo”. The sense of equality, of the norm and respect for thy neighbour denied her the possibility to diverge or “disagree with the world in which all [...] live” (Kundera, *Immortality*, 35). There is a close parallel with the situation that Pirandello’s Vitangelo confronts (1926). He happens to be called crazy because he does not act like people think he would. Instead of leaving a man penniless and homeless, as everyone expected, he buys him a neat house. He tries “to prove that [he] could be to others, as well as [himself], something other than what they believed [him] to be” (*Uno, nessuno e centomila*, 188). However, just like the passerby met by Agnes, the citizens call Vitangelo a madman since they do not recognise the Vitangelo they have represented in their minds (i.e., usurer).

To recapitulate, the contrasts between the two sisters, Agnes and Laura, regarding the conception of identity and individuality, are rooted in their diverse approach to their image. Agnes dreams of a world without faces and bodies, for she considers her inner self something that her exteriority cannot embody. On the other hand, Laura uses her body and her fascination for it as a communicative and expressive form of her self. She considers the body fascinating *a priori* because it has an essence in itself. Hence, Agnes longs for solitude, the absence of gazes, which deform her self, and Laura is satiated and gets to affirm her self only through the eyes of the others. Laura’s physical predominance in her conception of identity relates to posterity and immortality, of physically leaving a mark on someone’s memory.

### 3.1.5 Immortality

Since the personalities of others are just the image we create of them, it also means that in posterity, for memory and forgetting, these images can be changed, altered or erased. Therefore, leading with the assumption that immortality is the image of those who remain in posterity after death (Kundera, *Immortality*, 58), one can only deduce that these immortal images are prone to shift and mutate, with the consequent transformation into blurred and mirrored images of the past. In the novel (1990), Kundera distinguishes two types of immortality, which are minor and great. The first stands for being remembered by the closest or the people met, and the second means being in the memories of people who were never known personally, as could happen with singers and actors. These images and conceptions are marionettes, illusions, and parables of life with no factual truth.

As mentioned above, these are only illusions and images that come from the opinion of others. The dialogue recounted between Hemingway and Goethe concludes by considering immortality like an eternal trial (95). People will never cease to misread, interpret or over-interpret those around them, particularly the famous. In the process, they ascribe attributes that are more about the individual’s gaze outside of their own lives. Lastly, maybe more sadly, no one will ever read Goethe and Hemingway’s works anymore, but all will be interested in their life, especially in ridiculous, weird and probably untrue anecdotes (241). That is why Agnes felt everything in her life was seen and interpreted. For her, everything could be used against her after her death. She fears the eternal trial to which Goethe and Hemingway refer in this section.

Of course, the idea that Hemingway and Goethe’s works will not have any

relevance has to be refuted. However, following Kundera’s opinion on the connection between the biography and the works, this concept is not completely false. Kundera considers every future criticism or analysis inconclusive, for they will probably relate to the persona and biography of the author. He argues that more importance is given to the author than to their works, transforming the reading as a discovery of something about the writer instead of reading the work for the ideas and thoughts themselves. For example, people like to comment on or discuss Goethe’s and Hemingway’s libertine ways or analyse Hemingway’s writing through his drunkenness. Thus, the image of the author can influence the interpretation, analysis and reputation of their works, maybe even to the extreme of never being read again.

### 3.1.6 The Mosaic that is *Immortality*

Even if apparently acausal, these episodes create the novel *Immortality* (1990). Aristotle, a Greek philosopher known for creating the precepts of literature in his work *Poetics*, considered episodes sterile accidents not worth using for the continuity of the plot. What instead was worth observing were episodes with the removal of every extraneous piece that was not important that is what is accepted by others. Here I will call Barthes (1977) into the discussion, precisely the concept of *doxa* considered a universal discourse, the public opinion or belief, a form that is never defined by its content but only by its form (1278). Barthes associates the term *doxa* with the invasiveness and the power of mass discourse, a personified force, a *figura* or *simulacra*, that acts and oppresses the individual. In *Art of the Novel* (1986) Kundera discusses the importance of paradox, that is, contrasting common opinions or norms, considering the novel a paradox. Thanks to the diverse tales or points of view, it is also a “school of tolerance” (*Comedy is Everywhere*, 7) because the reader must “try to understand” the world through “various angles”, i.e., the eyes of the characters. He insists on the importance of every single episode, a piece of landscape presents itself. Every event is worth contemplating, for each “conceals within itself the possibility of [...] becoming the cause of other events and thus changing into a story or an adventure” (*Immortality*, 338) as it is life itself. In life, the verisimilitude of action does not exist: it is acausal, not rational. And this is what Kundera tries to grasp in his novels: the hidden ground, the basis of his characters. He believes that to explain humans and their behaviour, one must go through the figure and nature of metaphor (265).

## 3.2 Conclusion

In *Immortality* (1990), the theme regarding the self focuses on the concept of image. Since the self is mortal, what is everlasting is its image in the memory of others. However, by considering immortality as an image in someone’s mind, one can only assume that it is only a caricature or interpretation from the gazes of others. Therefore, the pivotal point of Kundera’s novelistic meditation stems from the contrast between ideal and real. The characters appear as “meditative interrogations” and “explorers of existence” (*Art of the Novel*, 1986, 28) who try to answer their internal queries, and their reflections walk the reader into an imaginary world that interprets the real one.

The episodes and the character's gazes considered the self and its existential inquiry from two key pillars: aloneness and togetherness. Albeit the characters act and think diversely, they all show how the self is malleable and easily influenced and interpreted by external forces. The chapter proved how the novel's ideas and meditations are affiliated with Luigi Pirandello (1926), Jean Baudrillard (2009) and Roland Barthes (1977). The most glaring one is the connection between Pirandello (1926) and his existentialism. Agnes considers humans based on prototypes, void creatures without essence and, as Vitangelo, empty *figuras* looking and searching for a form. Laura, who tries to create her self with her body and firm convictions, is another example of how, even if she tries to make them part of her self, they are just appearances, illusions that the being creates, to which they gave the value of reality. Finally, only a few attributes are accepted by society, thus, if someone acts outside of the norm is considered a mad person, just like Agnes' trespassing of a gesture and Vitangelo's action not foreseen by the Sicilian citizens.

The influence of external forces, such as cultural discourses, mass media imposition and others' points of view, connect the novel to the theories of Jean Baudrillard (2009) and Roland Barthes (1977). The power and weight of imagology, and its alternation of systems (Kundera, *Immortality*, 132) is what Baudrillard (2009) considers the overcoming of the sign over the thing signified. The signs, opinions, and 'parade of images' lead to a blurred reality, an illusion given the value of absolute truth, and becomes a norm, *doxa* (Barthes, 1977).

In order to break down this false impression of reality, Kundera uses the novel since it can try and understand unknown aspects or segments of existence. Hence, the work of art, like Pirandellian *umorismo*, is a fight between illusion and light-hearted meditations that can break down these constructions. Therefore, the novel is a paradox, a game thanks to which one realises that everything is relative and that there are no certainties. Luigi Pirandello considered *umorismo* the "sentiment of the contrary" (1920, 126), the mirroring of the illusion that causes its breakdown. It is performed when the moment of reflection is tied and indivisible from the artistic conception and helps the reader understand and accept the universal emotion of human frailties. At the same time, Kundera (1990) uses his character's thoughts as clear demonstrations of moments when meditation takes place. Most importantly, just like Pirandello, Kundera believes the novel can educate tolerance and understanding (1977). Therefore, Kundera is the *umorista* novelist that Pirandello described in *L'umorismo* (1920).

## Chapter 4

# *La festa dell'insignificanza* (*The Festival of Insignificance*)

In this third and final content chapter, the analysis will dwell on the most recent novel by Milan Kundera: *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013). The goal is to assess a relationship with the earlier works, thus asserting what Kundera described as his novel in variations. First, the analysis will consider Kundera's conception and depiction of identity and the struggle about the overcoming of the image. In doing so, the relation with the theories regarding existentialism and mass uniformity of Luigi Pirandello (1926) and Jean Baudrillard (2009) will be underlined. Lastly, the chapter will argue that Kundera relies on Pirandellian *umorismo*. Precisely, the belief in overcoming cultural impositions and showing the dualism between the freedom of the internal self and the static form of the exterior one (Pirandello, 1920).

### 4.0.1 General Overview of the Novel

*The Festival of Insignificance* (2013) is the most recent novel by Milan Kundera and the fourth novel written in French instead of Czech, starting in 1994 with *La Lenteur*. Despite the manuscript being in French, the book saw its inaugural publication on the shelves of Italian libraries and bookstores. Published in 2013 as *La festa dell'insignificanza*, is a translation made by Massimo Rizzante. The translation was the result of an ongoing exchange between the scholar and the writer.<sup>7</sup> Curious is how, after the trouble with the English translations of *The Joke* (1967), Kundera has taken to revising most of his own works in the various languages of their adaptation. Additionally, in 2000, he used Spanish to publish the first edition of his tenth fictional novel, *L'ignorancia*, and the French version was published only three years later. It is worth dwelling in the intersection of these languages for publication and the author's choice because they are informed by an aspect of translation theory: the impossibility to translate full meanings and depictions of a work. Kundera's constant shadow behind

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<sup>7</sup>Rizzante, Massimo. Personal Interview. 11 December 2015.

the hands of his translations can only signify the importance of the ‘will of the author’. When a work comes to be interpreted and changed during the translation process, the work itself will end up distorted and deformed caricature with diverse significations (Kundera, *The Joke*, author’s note), and consequently, the author will be subjected to the imposition of masks on their identity.

Structurally, like the other novels, Kundera divided *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013) into seven parts and reduced the characters’ actions to the *minimum*. It depicts four protagonists, Alain, Ramon, Charles and D’Ardelo, who meet, interact and debate about life. The setting is polyphonic, and the thoughts or perceptions of the characters are offered significant space within the narrative. The author does not intervene, even if he might mysteriously hide behind a small part, written in the first-person singular, ‘I’ (Chapter 5, part II). Nevertheless, every potential character has ties, links or connections to the others, thanks to their affiliations to the main themes.

*The Festival of Insignificance* (2013) is much different from Kundera’s Czech cycle. In particular, historical, philosophical and literary digressions are scarcely present. They are only deployed to assert a point or statement. Moreover, philosophers or historical figures are mentioned with lightness, almost emerging like imaginary characters. For example, the principal historical figure presented in the novel is Stalin. However, his actual self, actions and realities are not needed. The importance for the reader is made clear through an emphasis on Stalin’s image and what he represented. The crucial motif of *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013) is the effort made by people to assert their individuality. They battle against the imposition of images, masks, or representations of their personality. Thus, the central theme is the relationship between appearance and reality, façade and interiority. This motif is essential and relevant, since it ties easily to the main themes of his first novel *The Joke* (1967), resulting in the red thread of Kundera’s existentialism.

## 4.1 The Analysis

### 4.1.1 Identity Achievement

#### Adding Attributes and Using Others as Mirrors

The novel depicts in various ways how characters achieve their identity. In particular, the methods presented are: adding attributes to personalities, using others as mirrors, and being in complete solitude.

The addition of attributes that an individual may assign to themselves occurs if seen by the eyes of the other. This idea is depicted through the opposition of brilliance with insignificance. In part one (2013), *Introducing the Heroes*, after meeting D’Ardelo, Charles and Ramon discuss his nature. To describe D’Ardelo and his personality, Ramon compares him to his other friend Quaquelique. He states that their difference resides particularly in their adapted behaviour when approaching women. D’Ardelo acts like a peacock, showing off his academic knowledge and making subtle jokes too intricated to understand. Quaquelique has a discreet and calm presence, and he communicates without being at the centre of attention. Ramon considers him virtuous for “being ever-present by [his] voice and yet keeping unheard” (Kundera, 2013, 15). In the former case, women feel intimidated and put in a situation of competition, “obliged to shine

too, to not give [themselves] over without some resistance” (16). In the latter, instead of overwhelming the woman with contorted concepts and verbal displays, Quaquelique can spare the woman from her need for vigilance, for her presence of mind is not required. Brilliance intimidates the woman, while insignificance can set her free. Furthermore, brilliance does not only regard the relationship with women but also the view someone has of themselves. This understanding lies behind the fact that the person needs to appear, or feel, brilliant to project and hypertrophy their identity.

In this case, D’Ardelo cannot commit to any woman because he is more focused on embroidering his image. Hence, he does not allow the woman to assert her identity, almost like a master-slave dialectic, because he puts her in the position of a mirror. Here one can easily argue that it is white and straight males who are talking about women, and Feminist Theory would have several points highlighted as the imposition of the woman in an objectified role (see de Beauvoir, 1977). However, D’Ardelo’s behaviour is not restricted only towards women. Thus, it leads to another concept: others, and not solely women, as mirrors for one’s image. As in the case of brilliance, people can achieve their identity solely through the eyes of others. Ramon describes this peculiarity as being a Narcissus (Kundera, 2013, 16), precisely for the overvaluing of people. The eyes of the others mirror his reflection, and when D’Ardelo sees it, he feels the urge to embellish it and gild it. To do so, he must take “nice care of all his mirrors” (17), always resulting in a welcoming and cordial person. He likes his image and how he can control it. In fact, he decides to lie to his friends, saying he has cancer, for his demise would make him more interesting. The effect is his conversation with Ramon, who, after he heard the news, was “touched” and started to feel “a real sympathy” (17).

### **The Absence of Gaze and its Oppressive Force**

Another method depicted in the novel with regards to the self and its assertion is the freedom of gaze. Identity is achieved only in solitude, i.e., the lack of a look. Cordial indifference, or the uninterested stare of the passerby, is the chance for freedom. In fact, if freed from the gaze of the other, people can act as they feel. Ramon starts to realise this when he is in line for the museum. He notices the teeming crowd standing in the streets of Paris. Overwhelmed by anxiety, becomes aware that the chattering of people in the big halls of the museum would obscure the paintings. Therefore, he decides to leave and head to the Luxembourg Gardens. The sculptures amazed him: no one was looking at or studying them, and the inscriptions were always unread. There, the sculptures are free. The garden was less crowded, and people were there to be or act as they felt. The cordial indifference of people functioned to Ramon “like a soothing calm” (Kundera, 2013, 10). This idea can be connected to Pirandello’s protagonist Vitangelo (*Uno, nessuno e centomila*, 1926), and how he realises that the gaze of the other imposes diverse masks and roles on his identity. He understands that his body is a puppet, a marionette ready to be taken and assigned a form. However, it is not only the gaze of the other but also his own, for he cannot surprise himself in the genuine nature of action. The only thing one can do is be, without the weight of the gaze onto them, so that quarrels and uncertainties will not arise.

In addition, the character D’Ardelo, positions others in an objective role to

enhance his figure but also positions himself in a fictive part barely connected with his inner self. The most obvious example of the oppression of the gaze is the memory of someone in posterity, particularly those figures that survived the course of history. Not everyone is going to remain in the memory of posterity. Life and time keep moving on: when one lives, a host of circumstances are dictated by the outside, and at the time of death, one survives only in the memories of those who loved them. However, everything will disappear into the void whenever the holders of the person's memory will. Only a few, says Charles, can survive the fatal destiny of entering into oblivion. Nonetheless, since all the witnesses and holders of memories passed, there is no factual recollection of the person, transforming them into "marionettes" (Kundera, 2013, 22), puppets, and forms ready to be taken, just like Vitangelo realised (Pirandello, 1926).

Charles, in Part Five (Kundera, 2013), starts a digression on how the image of Stalin has changed over history. While older generations might have praised him, and the next one completely detests him, the newest one does not even know who he is. In effect, people of diverse generations can quarrel and discuss, but they do not realise that their point of view belongs to their epoch. They meet, discuss and talk, not seeing "they're talking to one another across distance, each from an observation post, standing in a different place in time" (Kundera, 2013, 21-22). Thus, Stalin has become a marionette, a caricature, a puppet waiting to be held and brought back to life. Charles hates all human representations of anecdotes of the past. If he were to write a play on Stalin and the episode of the Partridges, he would want to put it into a design for a marionette theatre. "No one has the right to create a person from a marionette" (22): no one can reconstruct a life that does not exist anymore. The interpretation of the gaze of the other, i.e., personal imagination, affects everyday life and interactions. One is conditioned by the opinion of others, thus imposing also on themselves a set of behaviours that are considered socially acceptable, as the common norm.

An additional discourse with regard to sameness and mass uniformity, concerning both the gaze of the other and cultural impositions, is depicted through a (fictive) conversation between Alain and his mother. In the first paragraph, Alain states his curiosity about the seductive power of the navel, particularly on how an era or a man can be defined if the seductive power of the female is centred in the navel. Alain answers these queries considering the navel the symbol of reproduction, thus believing that only angels, the perfection, are genderless and without a navel. However, one night, Alain's mother appears and contradicts this vision. She states that the woman without navel is not an angel but Eve "born out [...] of [...] the Creator's whim" (Kundera, 2013, 61). The first umbilical cord emerges from her uterus, and she becomes the roots of a body tree which arrives at the ceiling. She did not want to give life to someone that did not ask for it, she did not want to impose anything, no sex, no physics, no time, for everything was dictated to her (75). Therefore, she imagined a murderer cutting Eve's throat and, with her death, the whole tree would crash onto the ground. Alain's mother did not want to erase humankind but only the disappearance of its past, present and future. She wanted the annihilation of the tree "rooted in some stupid first woman who didn't know what she was doing and what horrors we'd pay for her miserable coitus, which had certainly not given her the slightest pleasure" (62). Alain understands that the navel represents uniformity, and that individuality is an illusion. Navels look alike, and

they do not present anything individually. The novel is “a call for repetitions” (74) because it does not celebrate the unique or the individual but the sameness of mass uniformity. By mentioning repetitions and patterns, one must refer to Jean Baudrillard (2009). The real is created by units and command models that, in effect, transform it into a hyperreal or *simulacrum*.

These conceptions can be reproduced infinitely with the resulting “successive phases of the image”. As an effect, culture precedes nature and generates a real without origin or reality. Baudrillard (2009) makes the perfect example through a metaphor with a map. As someone creates a map, and the territory is subjected to this image, humans process their relation to the world specifically through these images created by cultural discourses (1483). Therefore, in *The Festival of Insignificance* (Kundera, 2013), murdering Eve would mean erasing all the past, present and future of humanity, i.e., cultural discourses and mass enforcement, that puncture like needles people’s individuality. Cultural discourses and mass impositions would be erased, allowing people to be. Analogous is Pirandello’s argument through Vitangelo’s voice. To live, one must be, re-born every instant, not allow thoughts and groundless construction to manifest. One must not live for something that might give meaning or significance but be, like clouds, waterfalls and trees that do not question their existence (Pirandello, 1926).

#### 4.1.2 The Symbolism behind the Gaze

One of the most important episodes that addresses the theme of sameness and imposition by external forces is the episode of the feather (Kundera, 2013). During dinner, one feather starts stirring in the void above their heads. Everyone stares in surprise and contemplation, trying to find a meaning to that casual feather floating above their heads. Charles sees his misfortune, while La Franck considers it a sign from the Divine, a message informing her of her future glorious life. Everyone is astonished and follows its flowing in an almost blank stare. At this point, a voice in the first-person singular enters the novel. These are the only pages in which an ‘I’ is used, for it later disappears without leaving a trace. The ‘I’ imagines that the feather is not really there and that people nevertheless direct their gaze above their heads. This reaction is dictated by fear: they are afraid since the threat is above them, somewhere. It becomes something “incorporeal, [a] mischievously mysterious threat” to which a few proceed “without knowing where they mean to go” (Kundera, 2013, 56). Life becomes a representation of something, an image, an ideal, a daydream that will inevitably come to an end. The key to not letting this force the individual into an existential trap is not to take life seriously (56).

However, the imposition of one single representation not only makes people subjected to mass uniformity but also generates the disappearance of humour. Hence, the non-understanding of the diverse or different from the accepted norm. This leads to fear, from which the roots of the post-joke age, “the twilight of joking” (59), are planted. The conversation between Caliban and Ramon during the dinner can be considered an example. They state that jokes, because of the imposition of one willpower over the others, thus uniformity of thought, “have lost their power” and become “dangerous” (59). For example, Caliban, to improve his acting, decided to join the dinner party acting in the role of a Pakistani man. However, if discovered, people could believe that he is hiding

something. Their gaze would create an image of Caliban that does not represent the truth, for it concentrates only on the superficial analysis of the situation. He could not defend himself by saying that it was a joke, for he would be doubtful for there must be a “shady reason to be hiding [his] identity” (58). Jokes are subtle hints of something that is not fully said, affecting people with suspicion. In the end, Ramon comes to a deeper understanding of the concept of insignificance, precisely of its value, for it is “the essence of existence” (84). In each being and every situation, however dramatic, insignificance presents itself. Beings need to acknowledge it and “learn to love it” (58). Ramon sees wisdom behind an “utterly useless” performance or the unmotivated laugh of children. He considers its insignificance the key to a good mood, e.g., *umorismo*, the era of the joke. Another point worth mentioning is the use of the name Caliban. Used by Shakespeare in *The Tempest* (1610), it represents the degraded and bestial man. In this case, one could argue that the use of the name Caliban conceals a further meaning: he is acting like an animal because no one understands his ways of communication. Or also how a beast is able to speak a high level of English while discussing the language of dreams.<sup>8</sup>

### 4.1.3 Overcoming the Oppressive Gaze

One must simply exist and not look for depth or significance in sterile symbols such as a floating feather, for brilliance does not help the individual. Insignificance helps to escape the cage of the existential trap. As Hegel described, and as Ramon cites with fervour, it is “only from an infinite good mood [that one] can observe below [themselves] the eternal stupidity of men and laugh over it” (Kundera, 2013, 59). Humour, the only resistance against the wheel of time, cannot be conceived without an *unendliche Wohlgemutheit*, an infinite good mood. In this regard, the connection with Luigi Pirandello and his *lanterninosofia* is necessary. In his novel, *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904), Pirandello discusses his existential philosophy. One’s idea of the world, e.g., their self, is represented by lanterns that delimit the frontier between the self and the non-self. This light is given the value of absolute truth and represents the lens and guideline they use to analyse the outside world, i.e., the darkness around. However, this light is biased since beings examine themselves from the outside, thus falling into the existential trap and acquiring the role of the masks imposed onto them. Their observing themselves while living impedes, consequently, their agency.

In the same way, Kundera (2013), while describing brilliance, regards appointing things to oneself to depict and gild one’s identity, thus opposing self and non-self. Moreover, Pirandello (1904) affirms the existence of other lights, specifically collective lanterns, representing ideologies and religions needed for human orientation. Similarly, D’Ardelo (Kundera, 2013) to describe himself wears the mask, norm, and idea of the socially accepted and loved character, at all connected with his identity. Pirandello (1920) states that only *umorismo* can liberate momentary from societal conventions and expectations. These lights are biased, and the only way to overcome this existential trap would be to shut them down. Similarly, Alain’s mother imagines eradicating all these sterile images and roots that connect humanity and its history (Kundera, 2013). By doing so, humans would be free to be and not feel attacked by something outside

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<sup>8</sup>see Act III, Scene II.

their inner selves. Since both these solutions are unachievable, thus entrapping further the human in this artifice, the only thing left to do is not to take life seriously. To have an infinite good mood and enjoy insignificance when perceived (Kundera, 2013). As Pirandello’s humoristic reflection dismantles every image and appearance to understand how they are made (1920, 137), Kundera (*An Encounter*, 2009) considers humour as a “divine flash” that illuminates the world’s ambiguity and shows how men are incompetent in judging others. In other words, it reveals the “intoxicating relativity of human things” (18), or the absence of certainty.

## 4.2 Conclusion

The central theme of *La festa dell’insignificanza* (Kundera, 2013) can or must be understood as the opposition between inner and exterior self, reality, and appearance. More specifically, the novel’s crucial point resides in the discrepancy between the gaze of the others and the absence of it. Identity and its achievement are depicted in several ways, and the reader can easily relate some thoughts to Pirandellian existentialism and Baudrillard’s essay *Precession of Simulacra* (2009) about mass imposition.

Even if realised differently from Pirandello’s novel (1926), the reader perceives a difference between a person’s aesthetic appearance and interiority. More precisely, how those exteriors to an individual consider the gaze of the other or even mass imposition can help to enforce conformity and impose masks with no factual reality. Moreover, these impositions are enforced by humans on their own self. D’Ardelo (Kundera, 2013) adds attributes to his image or *figura* to embroider and gild it. The effect is his constant thinking and worries about his reflection seen by the outside. However, by acting as a Narcissus, he imposes an objectified role on the people around him. They become mirrors, relevant only for his own reflection. The gaze, e.g., personal opinion, enforces masks and parts on others, just like famous historical characters that have seen their image deform over time. Just like Pirandello and his protagonist Vitangelo (1926), *La festa dell’insignificanza* (Kundera, 2013) resonates with the fact that our *figura* is a marionette guided by the hands of a stranger.

The gaze of the other comes to represent the realities of cultural discourse and the imposition of opinions or beliefs from mass media. Since one’s willpower is imposed over the others, the consequence is mass uniformity. Behind this single and enforced truth resides nothing like Baudrillard’s *simulacra* (2009), which represents the absence of something forever lost. The novel (Kundera, 2013) exemplifies this through two episodes: Eve’s Tree and the Feather. Eve’s tree designates the connection between humans and the history of humanity. Thus, all ideologies, thoughts and beliefs are producers of uncertainty about the self. However, cultural discourses and collective opinions are so rooted in human history that the only chance to freedom would be cutting Eve’s throat. With this, mass imposition would stop the inferences and enforcement of masks and false roles in one’s life. Moreover, regarding cultural discourses and the loss of factual reality, the novel’s episode of the feather echoes Baudrillard and his *Precession of Simulacra* (2009). More specifically, the looking for meaning and deepness behind something that does not exist, for it is only a simulacrum. The non-present feather represents the precoded image and its influence on human

behaviour and relationship with reality.

The only way to overcome this existential trap is not to take life seriously. *The Festival of Insignificance's* (Kundera, 2013) discourse about Hegel's infinite good mood is connected indubitably to Pirandello (1920) and his thoughts on Fantasy and *umorismo*. Firstly, Ramon states that the secret of life is to appreciate its insignificance, what lies behind the veil. It is only through an infinite good mood that actual humour is achievable. Thus, for the suspension of every moral judgment, one can understand the relativity of the world. Secondly, as Pirandello (1920) uses *umorismo* to perceive and demystify simulations for the fight for life, Kundera (2013) uses the novel and the concept of insignificance as a way to free humans from social conventions, to dismantle every fictive ideal. In the end, it is a quest to allow every appearance of reality to simply exist.

## Chapter 5

# Conclusion

Milan Kundera's fondness for music made him experiment with the novel genre. His passion for jazz music and Beethoven lies in an understanding of the way that music creates variations of the same themes and does not alter or violate the pure essence of the motif (*An Encounter*, 2009). The variation means altering a minimal portion of rhythm or melody, but the unity with the precedent is guaranteed for their relation to the same theme. Polyphony is another concept that Kundera adapted from music. In particular, the power to present simultaneously diverse voices, bound but also individual. Kundera (2009) states that he adapted the method of music polyphony and musical variations to the novel genre. He does so to stay in contact and be attached to the existential questions of which he is fond in his writing. This background creates the chance to delve into the same theme from diverse situations, points of view or angles.<sup>9</sup>

But why the novel? Because novels “discover what only the novel can discover” (Kundera, 1986, 6). In *Art of the Novel* (1986), Kundera, while analysing the history of the genre and its significance, he offers a glimpse into why variation became so central to his novels, that is, recurring themes that confer unity to the novel (*An Encounter*, 161). When a single and actual truth is replaced by contradictory and personal ones, the sole assurance is that there are no certainties and that everything is relative. The novel is the perfect genre precisely for its disposition. It is the “poetry of existence *sine ratione*”, for it transports into the land with no rational thought: an imaginary and fantastical paradise for individuals since it denotes a region where no one possesses the truth (1986, 76). The novelist can create a picture of “extreme and unrealised” possibilities of the human world through imaginary characters. The work of art becomes complete meditations and inquiries about existentialism, specifically about diverse experimental selves that infer the novelist is the epitome of an explorer of existence (Kundera, 1986, 24).

For Kundera, the existential enigma is the shared theme or idea that emerges or stems from the introspections and ruminations of these imaginary and experimental selves depicted in fiction. The motif can sustain itself through digressions or excursus. However, depicting and portraying diverse voices and characters allows the reader to delve into a form of universal human thought. That is to

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<sup>9</sup>see *L'art du roman* (1986), *Les testaments trahis* (1993), *Le rideau* (2004), *Une rencontre* (2006).

say that the imaginary characters' thoughts and realisations are particular but also universally shared in contemporary society, exploring the most common situations of human experience to illuminate the essential aspects of the human condition. With this, the novelist can achieve what only the novel can do: discover the various (unknown) dimensions or segments of existence through the characters representative of every viewpoint (Kundera, 1986, 44). This concept relates not only to the depiction of diverse characters in the same novel but also to the portrayal of various voices and situations in the entirety of Kundera's works. At this point, one must realise that Kundera did not author novels in variations but one single work in variations in which thematic unity secures its coherence. The analytical argumentation for this thesis project focuses on three narratives written twenty-three years apart, proving that his works can be considered a whole novel in variations. Of the time distance in which Kundera published these novels, one can consider them pillar novels of Kundera's philosophy. *The Joke* (1967) and *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013) are his first and most recent works, so they are the progenitor and the realisation of his art of the novel. By contrast, *Immortality* (1990), because Kundera considers it his achievement and the perfect example of his novelistic style (note of the author, in Czech edition of 1993), signals the start of his particular approach to the genre of the novel.

The purpose was to detect whether Kundera has written one whole work in variations and if that can be assessed and portrayed through a comparison of these three novels. The premise must lie in the fact that, albeit these three novels present different situations and stories, the wholeness and concordance between the works lie in their affiliation and connection to the same subject matter. Kundera writes about different main themes such as love, revenge, oblivion, comic, memory, and identity. For this argumentation, I decided that the focus needs to revolve around two central motifs conferred in Kundera's novels: the self and *umorismo*. More specifically, how identity can be conditioned, if not imposed by others; and the use of the comic and Pirandello's *umorismo* (1920) to break down these enforced and implemented constructions.

The narrative thrust of each novel, regarding the themes chosen for the analysis, lies in the struggle individuals live for their negated agency in the asserting of their individuality. *The Joke* (Kundera, 1967) emphasises the effort and hardship to assert a personal view against the assimilation of oppressive thought. *Immortality* (Kundera, 1990) discusses the inauthenticity of images with respect to reality, and how that is created by the gaze of the other. Finally, *The Festival of Insignificance* (Kundera, 2013) demonstrates the oppressive force of the gaze of the other and the self.

## 5.1 Conclusions of the analysis

The central concept behind the creation or assertion of the self becomes the realisation of a binary opposition, which lies in the discrepancy or discordance between such polar positions such as the real and the ideal, private, and public, soul and body, pose and person, interiority, and exteriority. The self is represented as malleable and easily influenceable by the representations and the interpretations of it by the different gazes of others, which impose a form, mask, or role with no value of reality, for it does not include the interiority of

the individual. The masks imposed on the individual relate solely to the image of the person formed by the opinions or points of view of others that do not include their inner and hidden parts.

In every novel (*The Joke* (1967), *Immortality* (1990) and *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013)), the action is limited in order to enable a better comprehension or grasp of the characters' selves. As Kundera states in his *Art of the Novel* (1986), actions are insufficient to depict and resemble the image of the self (14). Instead, diverse characters' thoughts and meditations allow the reader to attempt comprehension of the diversity of the self. This difference in the grasp of the world is needed to have an exhaustive and complete poetic meditation on existence. Nonetheless, the characters believe their truth to be the actual one, for it is the only certainty they have, but they deceive themselves in their own ways. This is perfectly demonstrated when Ludvik came to understand the nature of masks when he noticed the young officer in the camp who was only playing a role, wearing an already-made mask (Kundera, *The Joke*, 98). Since factual reality does not exist, everyone acts according to their subjective opinion. However, the use of the word subjective must be debated, since these beliefs are revealed to be external precepts that have no value in reality: cultural discourses, mass media imposition or others. All result in a single concept: the gaze of the other. Therefore, even if in diverse matters, one can notice how the characters in this triad of novels share similar ways to assert or create one's identity. These ways revolve around the binary opposition that regards the presence or absence of the gaze. Nevertheless, as seen in this analysis, both risk the peril of an experience where the assimilation of his oppressive thought eliminates the possibility of agency for the other characters within each novel.

Just like the pivotal revelation in Pirandello's novel (1926), Kundera presents a difference between how one sees themselves opposed to others seeing them. Everyone has a "capricious and personal freedom" (1990, 256) to own a subjective point of view, usually based on looking at someone else's individuality. Ludvik, in *The Joke* (1967), came to this conclusion just as he was expelled from the Party and understood the essential divergence between the inner and exterior self. In this case, identity resides in the chance to be seen, looked at, or recognised as an individual solely through the eyes, the gaze of the other. The passive form of being seen is of extreme importance because of its reliance on the point of view or opinion of others generates the strict and indivisible connection between identity and image. In each novel, some characters attempt to affirm their identity through the adoption of a mask, form, or *figura* of themselves. They do so, hoping that their reflection and intervention can assume the value of reality.

The characters that function as exempla of this concept are Helena (*The Joke*, 1967), Laura (*Immortality*, 1990) and D'Ardelo (*The Festival of Insignificance*, 2013). The connection between the first two is intensely obvious: pose and body represent the conception and behaviour one has towards their body. They consider it to have an essence *a priori* and as a perfect form of communication and expression of their individuality because it is considered even more truthful. Helena (*The Joke*, 1967), for example, regards her private and public life equals. She depends on lists of likes and dislikes, many pieces of the puzzle that make her identity. Similarly, Laura (*Immortality*, 1990) uses her dark glasses and body to express her feelings inside. She also uses the method of addition, that is to say, to add attributes, ideas, and beliefs to oneself and attempt to identify themselves with them. Thus, their use of the body is essential

for the assertion of their individuality. Helena (*The Joke*, 1967) feels that her intercourse with Ludvík signifies their love. However, just like Laura in *Immortality* (1990), when she cannot have him, she wants to imprint her bodily image onto his mind by committing suicide. Thus, these characters believe that they can only affirm their selves through the eyes of the other, and they create self-made images to hypertrophy their souls.

However, as Ludvík (*The Joke*, 1967), Agnes (*Immortality*, 1990), Ramon (*The Festival of Insignificance*, 2013) and other characters present to the reader, the reaction or attempt to create a puzzle of the self does not assure or confirm the uniqueness or agency of a person. In fact, since ideas and beliefs cannot be infinite, individuals end up even more alike. Just like there are fewer gestures than people, one cannot have subjective principles and thoughts. Thus, the disappearance of uniqueness and the emergence of collective uniformity and resemblance. If gestures are fewer than people and used to hold meaning that is now lost, remote and unreachable, then they create individuals and use them as incarnations (*Immortality*, 12). It is obvious how also these ideas lose their deepness and meaning, for they do not represent actual thoughts or beliefs but predisposed images. Thus, if these characters give the value of truth to the image or role of a person, and this value supersedes one of their interiorities, then everyone is a puppet, a marionette that awaits the gaze of the other, just to be taken and manipulated (Pirandello, 1926). Because gaze is not just looking but also the action imposed by looking.

In fact, instead of affirming their individuality and acting as stage managers of their own life, they find themselves attached to something bigger, which reveals itself to be something pre-existent, fixed and established by cultural discourses or the opinion of others. They become subjected to the gaze of society and of others. This realisation comes to different characters in the three novels, such as Ludvík (*The Joke*, 1967), Agnes (*Immortality*, 1990), Alain's mother, Charles and Ramon (*The Festival of Insignificance*, 2013). Agnes and Alain's mother believe in the dependence of human existence on predisposed ideas, thoughts, prototypes and beliefs that regard human culture. Agnes believes in a computer program (Kundera, 1990), while Alain's mother is in an umbilical tree implanted in Eve (Kundera, 2013). The program and the constant connection with the roots of human existence create a humanity based on prototypes, forms and beliefs with no essence nor meaning but to which value of absolute truth is given.

At this point, it is worth a review of the episode of the feather in *The Festival of Insignificance* (Kundera, 2013). The characters, looking up and staring at the ceiling to pursue some significance, respond to the mysterious threat that is the question of the meaning of the self. In whichever way one tries to answer this query, it will inevitably reveal itself as an idea, a representation of something, an image, a daydream that will come to an end, thus exposed as a *simulacrum*. As Ludvík discovered in *The Joke* (1967), history and life are just stage sets, dramas before an artificial scene and humans are immatures who play factitious and imposed roles, poses or passions (100). They end up the *manifesta* (in the Latin sense) of their masks or functions based on, as Baudrillard (2009) wrote, “cultural hyperreal needs” (1482). Their needs do not depend on nature, albeit on *simulacra*, projected parades of images. The natural state is obliterated by culture, and personalities become “artificial resurrections”, the “synthesis of combinatory models”, and “miniaturisations” produced by units and models

that impose and overwhelm one's idea of self (1484).

Kundera (1990) strengthens Baudrillard's argument (2009) by condemning the rise of imagology. As Ludvik imagined a life made of stage sets, the character of Kundera (*Immortality*, 1990) states that imagology, as opposed to ideology, does not favour the emergence of knowledge or critical thinking. It does not influence the course of history but peacefully alternates its systems (132), just like Baudrillard's parade of images. The parade causes the blurring of reality and the consequent imposition and adaptation of sameness, of the "comforting flow" (166) of a collective entity that, in Kundera's words, transforms every individual into an ally of his gravediggers (135).

As mentioned above, one can try to describe and impose onto themselves parts of identity. Here the connection between D'Ardelo and his, using Kundera's words, "brilliance" is the perfect example because he uses it to add attributes to himself and to gild his own image (*The Festival of Insignificance*, 2013). However, by doing so, that is to say, acting as a Narcissus, D'Ardelo ends up being the personification of the gaze of the other, for his positioning of the other into an objectified role, the mirror one. In the same way, Ludvik (*The Joke*, 1967) uses all the other characters as roles for his personal achievement. He does not allow the other agency because he needs them in that position for his assertion. The most glaring examples are Zemanek and Helena, and mostly Lucie, who can embody the victim who is positioned against the oppressive male role in Simone de Beauvoir's dialectics (*The Second Sex*, 1977). By considering her a hazy or shrouded figure and an enigma, Ludvik did not allow Lucie to assert her individuality, for she was needed solely for his recognition. In the same way, de Beauvoir (1977) discusses how women are the male historical other, needed for his representation. Of course, this discourse does not want to fall into Feminist Theory, so de Beauvoir's argument is used to comprehend existential diversity that can happen between everyone unrelated to gender opposition (see Van der Tuin, 2018). In a way, what they experienced, and their fear of not being recognised made each character metamorphose from victim to oppressor. Ludvik (Kundera, *The Joke*, 1967) does not allow for the agency of any person he meets in the novel, and the reader is never allowed to know their interiority because they serve only for Ludvik's meditations. D'Ardelo (*The Festival of Insignificance*, 2013) cannot listen and include others in conversations, so he scares them away or positions them in a position of defence.

In each of these novels, the characters demonstrate to the reader that one must be a road, not a route; one must not look for meaning and deepness or finalities but for the absence of it and the enjoyment of different episodes and landscapes that present themselves. Kundera (1986) states that the self is ungraspable and impossible to comprehend through actions, for life does not hold verisimilitude (20). Life is ungraspable and is not rational, but as the novels prove, we live in a world of *doxa* and universal norms that none of us fully grasp but which each of us lives and acts with every day. Ultimately, Kundera demonstrates that our lives and loves do not follow precepts or *doxas*, universal norms. To perceive the real essence of the self is almost unattainable if not through the service of the figure and the nature of metaphor (*Immortality*, 1990, 280). Here, I would furthermore discuss that the viability of the self could also be perceived through Kundera's use of the novel in variations. Because of the sign overcoming factual reality, illusions are given the value and power of truth or common rule, norm, or, as Barthes writes, *doxa* (1977). The novel, in

variations, like Pirandellian *umorismo*, conveys the relativity and uncertainty of human life by mirroring the illusion and causing its breakdown. Thanks to the use of the novel as a paradox, thus, allowing every episode and point of view to be depicted (Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 1986), the genre becomes a “school of tolerance” (*Comedy is Everywhere*, 7) and teaches the reader to comprehend universal human frailties.

## 5.2 Suggestions for further research and social implications of Kundera’s philosophy

It would be interesting to analyse the concepts of inauthenticity and masks regarding the totality of Kundera’s novels. In doing so, a new assertion of the full unity of his work as one novel in variations could be made. Furthermore, masks and inauthenticity can easily point towards more analysis in the realm of translation theory. First, it would be valuable to assess Milan Kundera’s writings in chronological order to try to understand if, and if so, how his poetry has changed through time. A sort of philology of the author but focused mainly on his decision to abandon Czech and adopt the French language. Such research would help engage with the questions about whether there is a difference in his way of writing or his attitude/performance. Can he write and express himself in the same methodologies and assumptions that he does in his native language? Second, this concept would orient towards an examination of ideas about the masks and the creation of the double self. Is one the same person when speaking or writing in a different language? Thus, assessing whether Kundera has changed his style, methodologies and concepts, and his approach to reality.<sup>10</sup>

These are only two of many ideas and concepts that can be further discussed and analysed in Kundera’s novels. Not only regarding the Self and the author’s style but also social implications in present-day society. For example, one could think about ChatGPT and its ability to create well-written essays in seconds or any other AI (Artificial Intelligence) program that can artistically complete a work of art with a few keystrokes’ digits on a keyboard. In this world where reality seems to have disappeared, how can one live with this tension and concern between the real and the unreal? How can one disempower the fabrications, façades and *simulacra*? Maybe, as Alain’s mother stated, by cutting Eve’s throat and the connection with human behaviour.

Lastly, it would be interesting to assess the proposition that Kundera must be considered as a feminist. Many critics affirmed that Kundera writes misogynistic novels, and admittedly, it would be easy to apply diverse Feminist theorists, such as Simone de Beauvoir or Judith Butler, to prove this point. However, it would be even more compelling and intriguing to demonstrate, how Kundera is a Feminist. Through analysis of his novels and characters, like Ludvík or D’Ardelo, it could be assessed how Kundera’s works develop Simone de Beauvoir’s male and female non-reciprocal duality of self and others into a non-reciprocal duality between individuals. Thus, enhancing a concept of genderless existentialism: universally subjected individuals for their contact and relationships with others.

<sup>10</sup>Miletic, Tijana. *European Literary Immigration into the French Language*. BRILL, 2008.

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