Abstract:

This talk focuses on Milan Kundera’s concept of Central Europe, tracing it from his influential essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe” (1984) to his novel *Ignorance* (2000), in which he re-evalutes his concept based not on post-1989 realities, but rather on his own novelistic goals. No longer priviliging the region’s central location, Kundera redefines its state of in-betweeness, to one of geographic and cultural fluidity, and by extension he reinvents the adventure that lies ahead of the Central European novel.

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The Labyrinth of Central Europe and the World Paradise in Milan Kundera’s *Ignorance*[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is easy to get lost in the maze of various interpretations related to the concept of Central Europe, which are in their content frequently elusive and contrary.[[2]](#footnote-2) Central Europe is practically never semantically neutral in its historical, political, ethnic, and cultural connotations.[[3]](#footnote-3) It alway relates to something or someone, and every formulation has a very specific goal, which in turn reflects aspirations, desires, hopes, dreams, or nostalgia of its interpreter. And only the authority of the interpreter determines its atraction for the rest of the world. Milan Kundera - without doubt, one of the most well-known literary figures to be part of the discussion about Central Europe - has been extraordinarily successful in bringing the topic to the fore. His wilful defense of the region’s political identity, cultural uniqueness, and West European connectedness became an important theme of his essays, polemics, and novels especially from the 1980’s. Yet, in the past years, Kundera seems to have re-thought his concept of Central Europe based, contrary to expectation, not as much on the new post-1989 realities, rather on his own novelistic goals. His novel *Ignorance* (2000) attests to this re-evaluation. It offers a new perspective on the region, no longer priviliging its central location, in other words, redefining its state of in-betweeness, to one of geographic and cultural fluidity. To trace Kundera**’**s development of his concept of Central Europe is to reimagine the once enclosed territory and to reinvent the adventure that lies ahead of the European novel.

In November 1983 the Brno native, once an influential Prague intellectual and writer, and later a world-known Parisian émigré, published in the magazine *Le débat* an essay titled “Un Occident kidnappé, ou la tragédie de l´Europe centrale.” Soon the text appeared in other languages and journals,[[4]](#footnote-4) of which the English version titled “The Tragedy of Central Europe*,*” published in April 1984 in *New York Review of Books,* is the most famous one.[[5]](#footnote-5) The essay of an author of such bestsellers as *The Joke* (1967), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979),and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) aroused great interest in the United States and Western Europe. It directed the public’s attention to the cultural and political conditions of European countries behind the Iron Curtain and strengthened the position of their intellectual elites living in the West.[[6]](#footnote-6) It also incited fierce polemics with other prominent writers as for example Joseph Brodsky and György Konrád. Indeed, to this day the essay continues to evoke debates, although of different intensity and with a new focus andrelevance.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In “The Tragedy of Central Europe” Kundera lists a number of reasons for cultural connectedness between Central Europe and the West and on this basis he formulates his compeling message. If the free part of the continent gives up the territory beyond its eastern border only for the reason that it is on the other side of the superpower structure, it hurts not only the Central Europeans, but also the Westerners and their own cultural identity. This was clear to the director of the Hungarian News Agency when in 1956 under Soviet attack he sent out this message: “We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The East-West connectedness argument enabled Kundera to fulfill not only a cultural goal, but also a political one.[[9]](#footnote-9) During that memorable Orwellian year, it may have seemed unrealistic, even naive for Kundera to “re-capture” via his essay “a zone of small nations between Russia and Germany” from its “kidnapper” Russia (whose culture he considers to be “the radical negation of the modern West”) and to accomplish its “return to Europe.” And by extension, to enacta form of “revenge” for the death of the Hungarian director and his journalist colleagues.

Nonetheless, this symbolic return to Europe is not as straight forward as one would expect. Kundera, who expresses in his essay as well as in his fictional work open scepticism about the West and its sense of identity, worries that it may be too late, that the culture of the West “has already bowed out. The disappearance of culture, which we experienced in Prague as a catastrophe, a shock, a tragedy, is percieved in Paris as something banal and insignificant, scarcely visible, a non-event.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The last paragraph of his essay, which begins with the words: “The real tragedy for Central Europe, then, is not Russia but Europe,”[[11]](#footnote-11) thus reads as a warning to the West and as a dismal prediction for Europe as a whole.

Kundera’s goals in his essay were not only cultural and political, but in all probability also personal. More concretely, he constructed his essayistic introduction to the culture of European countries behind the Iron Curtain to shape the readers of his novels by providing a very specific context for his prose work.[[12]](#footnote-12) Thanks to “The Tragedy of Central Europe” his heroes do not inhabit an amorphous periphery of the Soviet Empire, but grow out of the traditions of Prague, out of the European cultural metropolis par excellence. Their creator – and this was especially important and valuable for Kundera – due to his own Central European interpretation could place himself in the revered community of such prose writers as Franz Kafka, Jaroslav Hašek, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, and “the great trinity of Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz, and Stanislav Witkiewicz.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Kundera is irrevocably Central European not only for the very specific cultural background in which he grew up and lived in until 1975, but also for his émigré experience.[[14]](#footnote-14) The émigré condition he considers part of “a typically Central European biography” as he writes in his essay when speaking about the life of Franz Werfel who “spent the first third of his life in Prague, the second third in Vienna, and the last third as an emigrant, first in France, then in America . . . .”[[15]](#footnote-15) Yet, Kundera is connected with Werfel, Musil, Czeslaw Milosz, and other intellectuals, not only through the circumstance of an escape from fascism or communism. Similarly like the other Central European writers, he sees his mission in the defense of Western culture. And he defends it with steadiness and with a Central European dourness. Considering that this “culture no longer existed as a realm in which supreme values were enacted” his battle may seem Don Quichotic.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The defense of a culture, one that functions as a natural and live bond inside an otherwise varied community of nations, and the fear of disintegration of its values remain for Kundera important themes of his novels and essays even after “The Tragedy of Central Europe.” His preoccupation with Central Europe, however, has faded.[[17]](#footnote-17) Perhaps this is not surprising. The political events of 1989 culminating in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and in the nineties the gradual integration of individual post-communist countries into the overall European structure, allowed Kundera to shed his now outdated concept of Central Europe. The need to underscore the region’s historical and cultural uniqueness in order to distinguish it from its Soviet occupier and to protect it from Western disinterest and forgetting was no longer necessary.And finally the urge to familiarize his reader with the Central European context has also vanished, as if the open borders gave way to immediate cultural understanding.

What also disappears from Kundera’s work, at least for some time, is the theme of exile. It vanishes both as an existential situation burdening his fictional characters and as an intellectual construct discussed in “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” a construct that derived from the kinship of émigrés and their existential fate in different historical times in Central Europe. Not until sixteen years after the publication of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and several other novels that are set solely in the French milieu,[[18]](#footnote-18) does exile re-appear, but this time from a different perspective and with unprecedented intensity. In *Ignorance* (2000) the theme of exile is not only a permanent and irrevocable state of being, but it also becomes raison d’être of this novel. What laid the groundwork for the final say on the topic, were the three earlier prose works, *The Farewell Party*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which explored the initial tribulations of exile.

In *The Farewell Party*, written during the seventies in Czechoslovakia just before his own emigration, Kundera foreshadowed the exilic condition through the anticipation of a character’s departure abroad. Jakub, the future émigré, becomes aware even before he crosses the border to the West that an escape from a country into which he was born by mistake or by fate does not give him a sense of an expected relief. On the contrary, he knows that he will always be bound to his homeland forever, if only for having been blind to beauty around him, a beauty that had materialized in the form of a graceful woman on the day of his departure. A few hours later, as he ponders a young boy with enormously thick glasses looking out of a window, the last image he has of his country before crossing the border, his own “blindness” and lack of perspicacity (unaware of the crime he had committed) come to focus, underscoring the difficult journey ahead.

Meanwhile, for Tamina, the tragic émigré in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera’s first novel written in France, the realization that she is inseparably connected to her past comes late, not until she finds herself alone in exile. She desperately tries to make a link to her past life by recalling the minute details of her husband’s appearance and by recreating their time spent together. Without the help of her diaries, which were left in a desk drawer in Czechoslovakia, she eventually loses this overly cherished past and with it the desire to speak. Tamina’s present tense, deprived of understanding by the adopted countrymen, makes her feel like a double-exile. The narrator pictures her as a small patch of grass with a circular wall growing up around her, an image that is chilling and forewarning.

Indeed, five years later this forewarning is heeded by the émigré Sabina, the artist from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Sabina no longer yearns for a bridge between her adopted country and former homeland. Her present tense in the West is meaningful on its own. It provides her with the freedom to paint in any style she chooses, lifting her from the restrictive bonds of socialist realism that she had to endure in Czechoslovakia. Surely Sabina’s artistic success and ability to quickly adapt to a new culture, reflects Kundera’s own position in emigration - his rapid rise to fame as a prose writer and intellectual.

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* could have been Kundera’s last novel dealing with exile had history not intervened. The collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia and other East European countries, resulting among other things in the immediate opening of borders to the West, provided the author with an opportunity to write the last chapter on the condition of exile. *Ignorance* (2002) is a response to this opportunity. It is an investigation of the final stage of the Odyssean journey, one that that takes place on the long-yearned for “clear-skied Ithaca.”

Kundera wrote about the émigré homecoming suprisingly late, more than a decade after his own experience of return as if to gain distance from the initial euphoria accompanying the dramatic events of 1989. Mirroring this creative delay in his novel, the two émigrés of *Ignorance* also take their time to embark upon the “Great Return” and moreover only upon the insistance of their Western counterparts. Irena and Josef who have been residing in France and Denmark, respectively, since the Soviet led occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, intuitively know that their homecoming after twenty years will not be a happy one, not “the ecstasy of the known.” [[19]](#footnote-19) Like their creator, whose return was not permanent - to this day he resides in France and occasionally visits the Czech Republic, they have no intention of making their visit into a re-settlement, into yet another emigration. Kundera juxtaposes their journey to Prague with Odysseus’ nostos to Ithaca, an intertextuality that serves to underscore the modern exilic condition as permanent, one that, however, is no longer burdened by nostalgia.

After twenty years of living in exile Irena and Josef plan a surprisingly brief visit to their native country. They spend only a few days in their hometowns visiting with family members and former friends, while searching for familiar sites and objects of nostalgic yearning. Although they have no illusions about their reunion with people and places, they are left with a much more profound sense of alienation and disjuncture than they had expected. Not only do they not feel at home, they do not feel welcomed. The resentment encountered from family members over property rights and over who suffered the most under the communist régime, leaves them dismayed and saddened. What startles them the most, is however, the total lack of interest in hearing out their stories of exile, of their lives in the West. Unlike Odysseus, whose tales of adventure capture the attention of the Phaeacians, Irena and Josef have no audience. This silence, symbolizing a denial of the émigrés‘ existence outside of their native land, is cruelly ironic - after the fall of communism the freedom of open borders does not evoke curiosity at what lies beyond, rather it installs self-absorption, even xenophobia. Where is the passion to know, to discover of those who lived for so long behind the Iron Curtain? Since Kundera defines the novel as “an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become” the reader cannot help but sense an authorial disappointment, even critique. Had disinterest and ignorance become the trap of the world today?

The only “adventure” to speak of within the pages of this novel, since Irena and Josef are denied to relive their exilic trials and tribulations (Kundera reflects this lacuna by denying the reader this information as well), is a brief sexual encounter between the two émigrés, Irena and Josef, who are brought together first by coincidence at the Paris airport and later by the ambivalent reception they receive at home. Their “adventure,” which is described in pathetic overtones, stands in contrast to that of Odysseus, for he is “the greatest adventurer of all time, [and] is also the greatest nostalgic.” Since Irena and Josef are neither, their encounter is sadly final.

The “Great Return,” thus ends with a flight back to France and Denmark, the countries that decades ago had accepted Irena and Josef as political refugees from the communist East. This outcome is not presented as a failure or a setback. Irena had realized even before her visit to her homeland that emigration interpreted as a misfortune is a mere illusion and “even though it had been imposed from the outside and against her will, her emigration was perhaps, without her knowing it, the best outcome for her life. The implacable forces of history that had attacked her freedom had set her free.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Moreover, inspite of the swift and successful democratization of Czechoslovakia, neither of the two émigrés sees it as truly connected to the West. Instead, they encounter an ambigious chaos of cultural signs that are meaningless and out of place. An image on a mural of two hands, one white, the other black expresses “the slogans of the new age: brotherhood of all races; mingling of all cultures; unity of everything, of everybody,” yet in this country Josef notes: “people hardly knew that blacks even existed.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Moreover, the image brings to his mind the clasping of hands between the Czech worker and the Russian soldier, a much detested propaganda piece that, however, is an indisputable part of history. The émigrés thus cannot but perceive the post-communist realities as part of the era that made them leave. They, very much like their Western counterparts either from this novel or from “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” do not think about the historical importance of their Central European homeland within the West European structure nor about the values that arise from cultural connectedness. They concern themselves only with personal matters, specifically with the value of personal freedom. And this leads the émigrés back to their adopted countries. What does it matter that they are not like Odysseus who fought the suitors to gain Penelope’s trust and as a result was able to resume his life on Ithaca. Perhaps they can inhabit their Ithaca in the paradise of their heart,[[22]](#footnote-22) but more importantly, they have a physical place to return to, a home they feel tied to: “a low wooden fence and a brick house with a slender fir tree like a lifted arm before it.”[[23]](#footnote-23) For these two characters “Kundera places the laurel wreath on Calypso rather than on Penelope”[[24]](#footnote-24) a triumph for exile, because a separation from a native land is no longer akin to death. A new home can be inhabited and a new soul mate can be found.

This uplifting conclusion to the émigré struggle in *Ignorance* is a culmination of a theme that Kundera pursued in four novels during the span of three decades. Yet the reader cannot but feel puzzled. Kundera, similarly like his self-absorbed characters of *Ignorance*, does not delve into the broader present-day political or cultural realities of his homeland or its transitioning into the West European structure.[[25]](#footnote-25) The narrow focus of this novel dealing with the last stage of exile stands in stark contrast to his previous works where the émigrés’ plight was closely juxtaposed with the fate of their country and concerns expressed in “The Tragedy of Central Europe.” The reader used to extensive authorial explanations, ponderings, and musings on political and cultural issues about former Czechoslovakia is confronted with silence. Naturally this leads to questions: Why is there no variation on the themes that once made his essays and novels so famous? After all, his homeland still struggles with its past marred by cultural destruction, ideological obstinancy, and population fragmentation, only now in a different political setting? Has Kundera lost interest in pursuing the present day realities of his native country and by extension of Central Europe?

Kundera‘s uncharacteristic silence in *Ignorance* on broader issues of his homeland may not reflect disinterest, but a reinterpretation of his concept of the center for both the region and himself as a writer. In his novel he reflects upon and mirrors the post-1989 border free Europe, its fluidity between the east and west, by no longer focusing on his country’s situation, by not making it the center of his narrative. He does not assign it exclusive importance (one that was necessary during the communist era), which he now finds limiting. This reasoning is alluded to in his last novel *The Festival of Insignificance* (2015). Here Kundera‘s musings on the eroticism of the navel and its central position on the body reveal the danger of a false sense of importance. As Milan Blahynka notes, the author’s choice of words is crucial for the navel in both French (nombril) and Czech (pupek) is regularly used in the saying “he considers himself the navel of the world.” Moreover, in French “nombrilisme” refers to person’s exaggerated sense of self-importance. This can also be applied to a nation according to Blahynka, who reminds us that during the inter-war period Czechoslovakia considered itself the real center of Europe and was proud of it. This attitude was taken too seriously in Prague as attested by the publication of a journal titled *L´Europe centrale*. But history taught it differently, the importance of the country based on its central position, proved to be a Czech illusion. Its self-privileged center was insignificant to its occupiers.[[26]](#footnote-26) To be free of the centrality notion is to let go of its very constrictions: spatial, historical, and cultural. To let go of self-significance may provide us, as Kundera writes, with a great opportunity, and also happiness and freedom not to take seriously the world, which only appears to be serious and cannot admit otherwise. And this outlook may also open more opportunities for the Central European novel.

Feeling borderless, Kundera does not have the need to direct his prose to a Czech audience. In fact many of his novels, including *Ignorance*, have not been translated into his native language. And it is not insignificant that in Czech bookstores his work appears under the rubric of world literature. Meanwhile in China, Kundera has become one of the most popular writers, the Chinese translation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* sold more than one million copies since 2003. It is also not insignificant that the transcript of *The Festival of Insignificance* was received by the Shanghai Translation Publishing House before the French edition came out. Has Kundera shed his Central European aloofness for a more distant adventure, one that conquers readers of other continents?

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1. The title alludes to Jan Amos Comenius’ *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, an allegory written in 1623. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Bugge, “The Use of the Middle: Mitteleuropa vs. Střední Evropa,**”** *European Review of History – Revue européenne d´Histoire* 6, no. 1 (1999): 15. Bugge characterizes the term Central Europe as elusive.

   Also see Vladimír Macura’s discussion of Central Europe in *The Mystifications of a Nation*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The exception to this semantically heavy term is its meteorological meaning “the high pressure system is spreading across Central Europe and is moving to the East,**”** in Jiří Trávníček, *V kleštích dějin, Střední Evropa jako pojem a problém* (Brno: Host, 2009), 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Czech translation “Únos Západu” appeared in the Czech émigré journal *150 000 slov* in 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The English translation of the essay also appeared in *Cross Currents,* a yearbook of Central European civilization, history, literature, and politics, which was edited by Professor Ladislav Matějka and published from 1982 to 1993 first by the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan and then by Yale University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. At the time, the Central European debate also moved to the Soviet Block countries evoking a reaction especially from dissidents. The debate was extremely heated and controversial also due to the fact that Kundera’s cultural-political concept of Central Europe is not without shortcomings, especially lacking in complexity, which to defend Kundera, can hardly be achieved in the span of few pages. See for example Milan Jungman “Kunderovské paradoxy,” *Svědectví* 20 (1986): 135-62. Interestingly, Kundera did not participate in this debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The theme of Central Europe has been increasing in relevance in the geopolitical sense especially recently, when in many former Soviet satelite countries, in spite of their integration into the European Union, there has been a feeling of threat from Russia.

   See *Yet Another Europe after 1984: Rethinking Milan Kundera and the Idea of Central Europe*, ed. Leonidas Donskis. Rodopi, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” trans. Edmund White,  *The New York Review of Books* 31, No. 7 (April, 1984): 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kundera openly admits to the political message, see his greeting to the senate meeting in September, 2009, in Jiří Dienstbier a Jiřina Dienstierová, Editors, *Evropan Milan Kundera* (Prague: Rada pro mezinárodní vztahy, 2010), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Václav Bělohradský, in *Evropan Milan Kundera*, 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. According to Adam Michnik “the fate of Central European literature” is exile. It is no coincidence that for example the great Polish writers from Mickiewicz to Milosz, and Czechoslovak writers from Kundera to Škvorecký, wrote their masterpieces in exile. The fate of this literature is also exile from within or censorship at home: Zbigniew Herbert in Poland, Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia, Georgy Konrád and Miklos Haraszti in Hungary, Danilo Kiš in Yugoslovia all had to write for the desk drawer. See Trávníček, *V kleštích dějin, Střední Evropa jako pojem a problém*, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kundera‘s abandonment of the Central European topic is inconspicuously evident in his view of the composer Arnold Schoenberg in “The Tragedy of Central Europe” and the novel *Ignorance*. In the essay, Schoenberg’s dodecaphony is described as a product of a Central European culture, while in the novel, the narrator discusses Schoenberg’s musical contribution as benefiting Germany, not the entire region of Central Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In the nineties Kundera published *Immortality, Slowness,* and *Identity,* none of which touch on the subject of exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Milan Kundera, *Ignorance,* trans. by Linda Asher (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kundera, *Ignorance*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 73 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Again this is an allusion to Comenius’ *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Kundera, *Ignorance,* 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. David Williams, *Writing Postcommunism: Towards a Literature of the East European Ruins* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kundera‘s translator Michael Heim went as far as saying that: “*Ignorance* is a missed opportunity.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. <http://www.literarni.cz/rubriky/aktualni/clanky/otazkami-oplyvajici-kunderova-oslava-ceho-vlastne_10274.html#.VbzcJcsw-70> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)