

The Unbearable Lightness of Being(1988)

Principal Credits:

production: Saul Zaentz, for Orion Pictures

direction: Philip Kaufman

screenplay: Jean-Claude Carrière and Philip Kaufman; adapted from the novel by

Milan Kundera

cinematography: Sven Nyquist

music: Mark Adler

cast: Daniel Day-Lewis (Tomas), Juliette Binoche (Tereza), Lena Olin (Sabina)

Background:

Kaufman's earlier film work included a remake of the classic horror film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), and an adaptation of Tom Wolfe's nonfiction bestseller about the American space program, *The Right Stuff* (1983). Following the commercial failure of that film, he might have been expected to take on a less problematic source than the Czech expatriate's philosophical and deeply ironic novel. In adapting Kundera's dense text, Kaufman decided to excise lengthy expository sections, to abandon the first person narration, and to diminish the role of the fourth major character, Franz. To compensate, he tried to remain faithful to the spirit of the novel rather than its plot and discourse. The result, most would say, is a film packed with subtle thought as well as erotic play, an intelligent, beautiful tapestry of life before and after the Prague Spring of 1968 that far exceeds the banal norms of American cinema in the 1980s.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. cinematography--The film was shot by the great Sven Nyquist, famous for his long association with Ingmar Bergman, in primarily grey, wintry tones that reflect life in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe and that contrast sharply with the vibrant rural scenes near the film's end. (Among the accomplishments of the film is the transformation of Lyons, France into an acceptable alternative to Prague, which was unavailable for political reasons).

2. documentary footage-- Kaufman incorporates newsreel footage of the actual events of Prague Spring with re-stagings of Tomas and Tereza among the crowds confronting the Soviet tanks. Some reviewers criticized this turning point in the story on different grounds: technical (the editing was too obvious) and political (the trivializing of historical material by blurring the distinction between fact and fiction).

3. music--The emotional texture of the film is underscored by the alternation of different styles of music: chamber music, oom-pah band, "Hey Jude," patriotic anthems and partisan laments, "Sentimental Journey," the tango, and the closing, haunting chords of the classical piano. The music also plays against the "noise" that is part of what Sabina calls "the uglification of the world": the invasion tanks, the helicopters at the border (both brilliantly enhanced in theaters by the use of new Dolby surround sound), and the muzak at the Swiss restaurant.

4. entropy--Some critics complained about the film's length; to most modern tastes, the film certainly does have a long denouement after the intensity of the Prague protest movement and the emotional return to the city. As the music gradually shifts to a minor key, the film "winds down" to an ending that (as in the novel) is spelled out before it occurs.

Topics for Discussion:

1. The characters of the film seem much more developed than their counterparts in the novel, and most discussions of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are likely to begin with debate about their relative moral values. For example, Tomas never replies to the question Sabina poses to him at the nightclub: "What do *you* care about?" Apply the question to all three major characters.

2. Kundera spends a lot of time in the novel discussing the concept of "lightness." What does the film's title mean?

3. The opening sequences depict a variety of "lenses" through which images are seen: mirrors, sunglasses, frosted windows, windshields, camera lenses. The photography session between the two women seems the culmination of this reflexive gesture. What does the film suggest about the nature and responsibilities of image-making?

4. Some critics have complained that the film is sexist, degrading to women, insofar as it apparently glamorizes Tomas's philandering and treats women as the objects of its own erotic gaze. Does your reading of the movie support this view?

5. Franz tells Sabina that from now on they must "live in truth." What does this expression mean in the context of the film's representation of politics, sexuality, and professional creativity? Do any of the characters manage to achieve this ideal existence?

6. Much of the film's effect derives from the almost inexpressible beauty and suggestiveness of certain privileged images: the long shot of Tomas wading with the swans, the slow motion, reverse motion insert shot of Tereza floating in the swimming pool, the still life closeup of the cactus plant, the long shot of Tomas riding the tractor. Perhaps the greatest of all is the closing image, the truck turning the bend into the unbearable lightness. Try to define the meaningfulness of any of these memorable moments (to which, perhaps, you can add some of your own).

7. By repeating certain motifs (like "Room #6"), the film manages to incorporate something equivalent to the novel's exposition of "the myth of eternal recurrence." Describe how a number of these images provide the long narrative with its structure, introduce a note of foreshadowing, and provide a sense of an ending.

8. The death of Karenin is an unabashedly sentimental segment in an otherwise philosophical and "adult" film. Why has Kaufman expanded upon its effect in Kundera's novel?