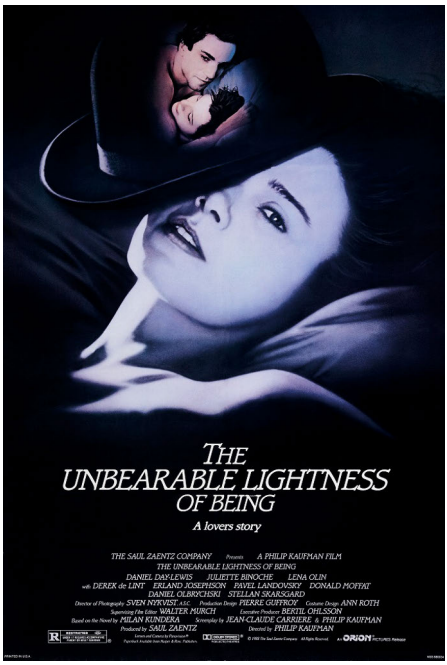
The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1988)

Sandra Folie

dir. Philip Kaufman; prod. Saul Zaentz; screenplay Philip Kaufman, Jean-Claude Carrière; photography Sven Nykvist; music Mark Adler. 35 mm, color, 171 mins. The Saul Zaentz Company, distrib. Orion Pictures.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is based on the 1984 eponymous novel by Milan Kundera. Because of its dominant heterodiegetic narrator, the novel was initially said to be »un-adaptable« (Cattrysse 222). In their screenplay, however, Philip Kaufman and Jean-Claude Carrière replaced the narrator's »I« with an »eye« (Insdorf 24). Thus, they effectively reimagined the readers of an intellectual novel that is neither character- nor plot-driven as viewers who are to be drawn into the atmosphere of the film. The film's focus is on the love triangle between the brain surgeon and womanizer Tomas (Daniel Day-Lewis), the provincial but intellectually curious waitress Tereza (Juliette Binoche), and the Bohemian, free-spirited artist Sabina (Lena Olin), rather than on the narrator's philosophical musings on the Prague Spring and its aftermath. In an interview, Kaufman said that they »had to find a thread« and that they »chose the lovers' story—not just a love story but all the different variations on love« (James). The decision to explore social and political forces through the dynamics of a triangular relationship—a theme to which Kaufman would return in *Henry and June* (1990) and *Quills* (2000)—made the film an intriguing intertext for Berengar Pfahl's 2007 adaptation of Wei Hui's bestseller → *Shanghai Baby* (1999). The film revolves around a love triangle in 1990s China, another socialist country at a time of upheaval. In the opening sequence, the main character, Coco (a female counterpart of sorts to Tomas), names *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as her favorite movie, which not only anticipates and complements the quotes from Kundera's novel that already exist in Wei Hui's book, but also explicitly calls for a comparison with Kaufman's film.

Despite its literary origins and popularity in Europe, the film was a U.S.-American production primarily geared towards an American audience. This is particularly evident in the supposedly »Czechoslovakian« accents performed by the international cast. According to Kaufman, it was Miloš Forman who offered him the project. With family members living in Prague, Kundera's plea for sexual and political freedom seemed too risky a venture for the Czech filmmaker to take on. Due to the tense political situation, Kaufman was unable to film in »authentic« locations, and therefore shot most of the exteriors in Lyon. For added authenticity, he consulted with the Czech New Wave filmmaker Jan Němec, who lived in Prague in the late 1960s (Insdorf 14). European cinema was clearly an inspiration for Kaufman. For instance, he employed a *cinéma verité* style—even incorporating archival footage of the 1968 Russian invasion of Prague, taken by Němec. Other elements include a tendency towards long takes and a distinct comedic lightness (Cattrysse 228-29): »I wanted to begin in a comedic way, as some of the Czechoslovak films around '68 did. *Loves of a Blond*, by Milos Forman, who had been one of Kundera's students at the Prague National Film School, comes to mind. There should be lightness at the beginning, which was one part of the Prague Spring« (Kaufman qtd. in James).

The film indeed starts in a very »light« manner: The viewers look at a shabby wall in an apartment building, partially illuminated by warm sunlight, and hear the ringing of church bells, pigeons cooing, laughter, and love moans. The following title card—»In Prague, in 1968, there lived a young doctor named Tomas«—is accompanied by a cheerful violin concerto, *Pohadka* (*Fairy Tale*) by Leoš Janáček, suggested by Kundera himself. Both the textual and acoustic levels are reminiscent not only of fairy tales but also of silent films and, thus, the medium's past. Early Hollywood talkies also come to mind, such as → *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which similarly opens with an unrolling script—»There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South […] Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow«—and sentimental music. Kaufman's alleged fairyland, however, is Czechoslovakia and its »socialism with a human face,« as one character so eloquently puts it. Alongside Victor Fleming's controversial adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's Southern Civil War epic, as well as numerous other classic Hollywood melodramas such as → *Casablanca* (1942) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was included in the American Film Institute's »100 Years . . . 100 Passions« list of the top one hundred greatest heterosexual love stories in American cinema.

Although not a melodrama in the strict sense, the film's hybridity of genre—it »begins like an erotic comedy, turns into a political tragedy, and ends in a domestic pastoral« (Insdorf 14)—is held together primarily by its melodramatic »mode of excess.« First, we follow the love story of Tomas and Tereza, who meet by chance when the former has to substitute for a colleague during an operation in a small spa town, where Tereza happens to work as a waitress. Sometime later, Tereza shows up on his doorstep in Prague and—despite Tomas' bachelor rule of never letting a lover spend the night—she stays over. The two become a couple and eventually marry. However, the playboy Tomas continues his various love affairs, especially the one with Sabina, »the woman who understands him best.« She is depicted on the film poster, wearing a bowler hat from her grandfather's grandfather. Sabina transforms this »heavy,« masculine, and mandatory headgear of the past into a »light,« feminine, and perhaps even feminist symbol of the »liberated« Prague of 1968.

One evening, at a dance, Tomas laments that »morality has changed since Oedipus,« who gouged out his eyes out of guilt for a crime he unknowingly committed. Meanwhile, today's political leaders would use their willful ignorance of the atrocities committed during the »Stalinist winter« as an argument to stay in power. Tomas says that he does not really care about politics, but as he watches Tereza dancing with his colleague and, uncharacteristically for him, feels jealousy, this also seems to have an effect on his political conscience. Shortly after marrying Tereza and adopting their dog, Karenin, he publishes his thoughts on Oedipus in a newspaper article, in which he openly criticizes the communist government. In a similar way, Tereza's private feelings seem to turn almost imperceptibly towards political action. As she confronts Tomas, upset and crying, about his constant infidelity, the crystal glasses in the apartment suddenly begin to clink. The Russian tanks roll through the narrow streets of Prague and the city rises—both mirroring and rousing Tereza's passion as she desperately starts to photograph the oppressors and their acts of violence. Tomas' and Tereza's emotional reactions encourage the audience to empathize with political events that they may otherwise be emotionally detached from. Or, as Kaufman and Carrière stressed in an interview: They did not make a political film »but a love story into which politics intrudes« (James).

After the suppression of the Prague Spring, the couple, like Sabina before them, flees to Geneva, where their love triangle continues. The film's melodramatic »mode of excess« reaches another tipping point in an erotic scene between the women, which »transmutes sex to power, as Tereza usurps Tomas' command, ›Take off your clothes‹« (James)—his signature line that recurs several times during the film. When Tereza asks the self-confident Sabina to be her nude model, the aspiring photographer becomes painfully aware of her own vulnerability. Hiding behind her camera, she gazes at Sabina's naked body while symbolically penetrating her with the loudly audible, rhythmic shots. At one point, Sabina appropriates Tomas' line, »Take off your clothes,« and starts photographing Tereza, who at first resists, ashamed of her nudity. The erotic tension slowly builds during this scene and finally erupts in a liberating fit of laughter. Afterwards, Tereza makes the decision to leave Switzerland, turning her »virtuous suffering into action« (Williams 66). In her farewell letter to Tomas, she writes: »I'm weak. I'm going back to the country of the weak.« As Rita Kempley aptly observes in her review, »the movie is held together by the constant tension between people and nations, the power of love and the love of power.« Tomas, »torn between the two women, as he is between East and West, anarchy and order« (Kempley), follows his wife back to Prague: an act that is simultaneously unexpected and unavoidable, transforming him from an initially »amoral Don Juan« into both a romantic and »a political hero« (Insdorf 15).

Because of his refusal to sign a retraction to his Oedipus piece, he can no longer practice his profession and ends up a window cleaner. This lack of perspective, however, does not diminish his erotic adventurousness, which eventually becomes unbearable for Tereza: »I know. I know. You've explained it to me a thousand times. A thousand times. There is love and there is sex and sex is entertainment, like football. I know, it's light. I wish I could believe you. But how can someone make love without being in love? I just don't know.« She wants to be like him, »insensitive« and »strong,« but fails in the attempt, learning that her awkward sexual encounter with a stranger may have been a set-up for blackmail. Consequently, the couple leaves Prague again. As politi-

cally suspicious subjects whose passports were confiscated upon their return, they run out of options, and eventually settle on a friend's remote farm in the Czech countryside. There, »in a kind of narrative respite which is vaguely reminiscent of the lovers' fleeting refuge in the icy wastelands of Russia in Dr Zhivago« (*20/20 Movie Reviews*), they spend a laborious but idyllic time together. Thus, the film ends as it began, in a »light« »space of innocence« (Williams 65). Just as the invasion of the Russian tanks before, now it is the death of their dog (likely the saddest scene of the epic-length film) that bonds the couple more firmly together, and this time for good. »Tomas, what are you thinking?« »I'm thinking how happy I am.« These are their last words on their ride home from a dance, before the desolate country road in front of them fades to white. And even though their death is »the saddest of endings, it's a happy ending« (Kaufman, audio comment on DVD).

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