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Irreconcilable Oppositions: "*Es Muss Sein*" and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

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IRRECONCILABLE OPPOSITIONS: “*ES MUSS SEIN*” AND *THE UNBEARABLE
LIGHTNESS OF BEING*

by

ANGELA C. MILTON

(Under the Direction of Tomasz Warchol)

ABSTRACT

Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a novel written in response to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s myth of eternal return. Through questioning Nietzsche’s myth, Kundera creates an existential framework that rejects eternal return and illustrates his foundational concepts of lightness and weight. Kundera posits that in the absence of eternal return, life becomes meaningless because all of the moments of a person’s life disappear the moment that life ceases to be. In order to combat this terrifying prospect, Kundera suggests that a person must combat fate. Likewise, a person may discover how to give significance to life through the pursuit of lightness or weight. This thesis examines the function of lightness and weight and uses them to explore films that visualize Kundera’s key concepts. Because the novel has a limited scope, it is difficult to examine the breadth of these concepts and fully unlock their complexities. Removing them from Kundera’s novel and using them as a lens to examine films allows the ideas to move from the hypothetical sphere so that they can become fully meaningful.

INDEX WORDS: Milan Kundera, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Es muss sein*, Eternal return, Lightness, Weight, Existentialism, Redemption, Fate, Oppression, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *Mammoth*, *The Hours*, *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven*

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DEDICATION

To Juanita, for making me learn words like “nuance” and “palpable.” No words can adequately express my indebtedness to you. Thank you for taking me in as your protégé and for teaching me the importance of being a lady. Thank you, most of all, for your friendship.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	8
Laying the Groundwork: Nietzsche's "Mad Myth" and Kundera's Equivocal Response	8
2 <i>MAMMOTH</i> (2009)	27
Discovering the Weight and Value of Our Relationships	27
3 <i>THE HOURS</i> (2002)	38
The Oppression of Fate and the Unbearable Choice	38
4 <i>AUF DER ANDEREN SEITE/THE EDGE OF HEAVEN</i> (2007)	47
The Weight of Redemption	47
5 CONCLUSION	56
Subverting Fate and Taking Back the Freedom of Autonomy	56
NOTES	59
WORKS CITED	64

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Laying the Groundwork:

Nietzsche's "Mad Myth" and Kundera's Equivocal Response

Milan Kundera's most well-known work, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a poetic exploration of human lives and fate, is greatly influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's myth of eternal return. The novel builds its plot and theme from Kundera's interpretation of Nietzsche's myth, and in the opening lines of the novel, Kundera poses a question to which his elaborate novel will become a carefully constructed answer. He points out that Nietzsche's "idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum," constructing the framework of his novel around the central question, "what does this mad myth signify?" (3). In the next few chapters, Kundera briefly describes Nietzsche's myth, questioning it all the while. In explaining Nietzsche's idea that eternal return signifies a heavy burden because "in the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make," Kundera concedes, "if eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, then our lives can stand out against it in all their splendid lightness" (5). Then, he asks the question that will drive the novel: "is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid?" (5), which ultimately he decides is unanswerable. For Kundera, weight is a crushing burden that "pins us to the ground" yet weight is what most of us long for because "the heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become" (5). On the other hand, lightness causes man to be lighter than air and soar into the heights, even though his movements and choices become "as free as they are insignificant" (5). Through his frequent digressions, Kundera questions whether we have agency or whether we are simply fated to live under the sign

of weight or lightness.

In Kundera's novel, the concepts of lightness and weight are intricately interdependent on Nietzsche's myth. Eternal recurrence, just like lightness and weight, offers two choices: we can accept that all of our actions will recur infinitely and seize the opportunity to live affirmatively; or we can be crushed by the prospect that all of our actions whether negative or positive will repeat exactly as they once occurred. Accepting eternal recurrence as a form of affirmation frees us from the crushing prospect that we can never change our past actions or terrible events of history and thereby gives us a sense of freedom which falls under the category of lightness. Likewise, allowing the burden of eternal return to crush us suggests a great burden and thereby falls under the category of weight. Accepting Nietzsche's myth that all life is the same, however, limits the significance of free will.¹

Kundera rejects Nietzsche's myth of eternal return, arguing that our lives may fall under lightness or weight because of fate, but we can also choose whether to pursue these two ways of being. In rejecting that all actions and events of our lives will infinitely recur, that is in the absence of eternal return, Kundera believes we have more autonomy. Referring to the ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides, who believed lightness to be positive and weight to be negative, Kundera simply does not know if Parmenides were right, but admits the "lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all" (6).² This becomes especially clear as the novel complicates these two concepts and associates them with complex emotions that are greater and more intricate than simple binaries.³

As the novel defines and reflects on the dichotomies of lightness and weight, it presents four characters and illustrates how they respond to these two categories. Tomas and Tereza are brought together by a chance meeting; he is a surgeon who is sent to her provincial town as a

last-minute replacement, and she is a waitress at a small restaurant in the hotel where Tomas stays. Tereza leaves behind her life to join Tomas in Prague and the two fall hopelessly and irrevocably in love, but Tomas is torn between her (his lover) and his mistress Sabina. Franz, a university professor, shares Tomas's mistress Sabina and desires to leave his wife for her. The novel initially associates lightness with Tomas and Sabina and weight with Tereza and Franz, but complicates these two categories as the characters' stories unfold. How will the characters respond to life's challenges in the absence of eternal return?⁴

Nietzsche and Eternal Return

In order to understand the questions Kundera raises about eternal return, it is important to grasp how Nietzsche imagined this myth. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche explains:

This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you. (qtd. In Hatab 94)

This prospect, Nietzsche claims, would either crush a person, or cause his or her actions to become immensely burdened under the stress of weight. We can choose whether to reject or to accept this notion but we must, as Hatab explains, "release" ourselves and let the "necessity and perfection [of the eternal recurrence] flood through [us]" (94). This release allows us to fully embrace the myth; this is not a rational embrace but rather a leap of faith. In Nietzsche's work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the godlike character Zarathustra struggles with the spirit of gravity and the idea of accepting rational explanations that weigh one down as gravity weighs one down. While it is never made clear exactly what the spirit of gravity is, T. K. Seung explains that it may be "the source of all the worldly concerns and anxieties that relentlessly haunt and plague human

existence. In short, the spirit of gravity makes life hard and heavy to bear” (153). In Nietzsche's epic, Zarathustra says, “I am enemy to the spirit of gravity [. . .] He calls earth and life heavy, and so the spirit of gravity *wants* it! [. . .] And we—we bear loyally what we have been given on hard shoulders over rugged mountains! And when we sweat we are told: ‘Yes, life is hard to bear’ ” (164-65). Nietzsche posits that once we decide that we can make our own lives meaningful, that is, once we have accepted the will to power, we will no longer be crushed by the force of gravity. Petra von Morstein echoes this assertion, conceding if one accepts “Nietzsche's wager,” he/she has “nothing to lose and all to gain” (69), because we have the option to lead a life that will make us proud.

In establishing the framework for the myth of eternal recurrence, Nietzsche explains that if all of our actions were to recur infinitely then “the course of the world after any given moment [would] ultimately [lead] back to that moment in a ring of eternal recurrence” (Solomon 343). Nietzschean scholar Arnold Zuboff explains that for Nietzsche, eternal recurrence could consist of endless repetition thereby robbing the human life of any personal meaning—a rather bleak prospect (Solomon 343-44), but offers that instead of allowing this to rob our lives of meaning, Nietzsche believes it to be the “highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable” (qtd. in Hatab 57). That is to say, Nietzsche’s myth is a metaphor designed to motivate us to take our actions more seriously. We should live in such a way that all of our actions will be “*worthy* of eternal repetition” (author's emphasis, Hatab 64). Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence may seem difficult to grasp if we take it literally. However, we must recognize instead that the myth is a craving for objective value. According to Nietzsche and other existentialists, there is no objective truth; we must give our own lives value. The concept, therefore, is a life-affirmation for Nietzsche who is painfully aware, that “humanity cannot live without some sense of purpose and

meaning in life” (Hatab 61). After the “death of God,” Nietzsche believes that without having a higher being to tell us how to live our lives, we must decide for ourselves what will make them significant.⁵

Because Nietzsche’s myth rejects that there are any external circumstances that make our lives meaningful, we must rely on our own interpretations. Nietzsche explains that this acceptance that we are in control, this will to power, “will be the sweetness of the rest of [his] life” allowing him to “learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them” (*The Gay Science* 157) and he urges us that we too can find this acceptance. Rather than focusing on the terrifying prospect that our past mistakes will return infinitely, we can strive for our actions to be admirable—we can focus on the beauty and necessity of the world in which we live. Once we have made this choice, Nietzsche claims, we must embrace what he calls “*amor fati*” or the love of one’s fate (*The Gay Science* 157). Therefore, we will not regret fate, but choose to turn it into something that makes our lives significant. This reality that we create for ourselves represents lightness for Nietzsche and weight is the truth and justification we crave but that does not really exist because there is no objective meaning.

Kundera’s Existential Framework: Lightness and Weight

In response to Nietzsche’s myth, Kundera concludes that lightness and weight are more ambiguous and burdensome than Nietzsche claims and it is difficult to discern which is better.⁶ In the sixth section, “The Grand March,” the narrator reveals the fluid nature of these dichotomies by pointing out, “rejection and privilege, happiness and woe—no one felt more concretely than Yakov [Stalin’s son] how interchangeable opposites are, how short the step from one pole of human existence to the other” (244). This reflects Kundera’s previous admission that whether lightness can be assigned a positive value and weight a negative one proves incredibly

ambiguous. Likewise, is it difficult to know what we want because we have no basis for comparison. In his adaptation of Nietzsche's myth, Kundera proposes that while historical events are bound to be repeated, (indeed they have been in the past)⁷ an individual's life cannot. He explains that "We can never know what we want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come" and "there is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison" (8). Therefore, all the choices that we make will either lead us either to feel weighed down or to suffer "the unbearable lightness of being." That life cannot have meaning because it can never be repeated or retried hovers painfully over *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera suggests that if we were able to *practice* life choices, we might perhaps escape the weight but since we cannot, we are all subject to live with the unbearable lightness of being.

Kundera's concepts of lightness and weight transcend the notion that an individual's actions result in good or bad or that they can be morally judged. Just like Nietzsche's, they are not based on morality. The novel seeks to present the choices that an individual makes and shows how those choices will result in the lives of lightness or weight. These two concepts overlap; they are not fixed or directly opposite, as Kundera admits that so much of life, history, etc, is based on binaries without a clear distinction between them, citing as an example that "if Czech history could be repeated, we should of course find it desirable to test the other possibility each time and compare the results" (223) but in the end he concedes "*Einmal ist keinmal*. What happens but once might as well not have happened at all" (223). In fact, in *The Art Of the Novel*, Kundera points to knowledge as the novel's "only morality" (6). Kundera's philosophy seems just as complicated and often contradictory as that of Nietzsche. While Nietzsche's idea is "grounded in the existential need for eternity" (von Morstein 67), his philosophy also holds that

all life repeats as it once was. Furthermore, while Nietzsche believes that all moments are worthy of being repeated, Kundera struggles with and rejects this notion. Among the many horrific events of history, Kundera recalls a devastating war between two African kingdoms in the fourth century, the French Revolution, and the Holocaust, conceding that if events such as these recurred infinitely, it would be as horrible as being “nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross, [. . .] a terrifying prospect” (5). Therefore, there is no chance of changing the way things once occurred. While Kundera admits that because life does *not* recur, there is no chance of retrying events, it seems that this problem is also present within Nietzsche's myth. In that case, they are not so much opposites as they are complications of each other, which is what Kundera's concepts are gradually revealed to be as well.

As a result of his questioning Nietzsche's myth, Kundera creates four fictional characters whose lives are deeply affected by one another. The character who sets the plot in motion, Tomas, is a surgeon who seems content to live a carefree and noncommittal life until Tereza, a naïve waitress, appears to him with her “enormously heavy” suitcase (10) signifying the heavy burden she brings into his life. Later, Tomas recalls that she came to him because of fate and arrived like the child Moses: “a child put in a pitch-daubed bulrush basket and sent downstream” (10). The other two major characters, Sabina and Franz, parallel Tereza and Tomas. Sabina, who is somewhat like Tomas in her desire to be carefree, also avoids emotional commitments and does not spend too much time in any place. Franz, on the other hand, longs for weight and commitment (just like Tereza) and this longing leads him to his death. Whether associated with weight or lightness, Kundera's characters all contend with life's challenges and struggle to make their choices and manage their relationships in a meaningful way.

Fate and “*Es muss sein*”

Kundera's inquiry whether a person will choose weight or lightness becomes rather complicated as the novel offers the idea that we have some choice in whether we will live under weight or lightness even in circumstances beyond our control. Kundera continually returns to the question “*Muss es sein?*” concluding that yes, “*Es muss sein*” but that “*Es könnte auch anders sein*” (35).⁸ The significance of this answer is that fate controls our lives, but we also have the ability to choose. In exemplifying this point, Kundera presents two characters whom it seems that fate has brought together –Tomas and Tereza. Even though they choose to remain together, they did not choose to be brought together. Marie Bednar, who reviewed the novel upon its release in 1984, offers a rather bleak portrait of the characters and their plight. In her description of Tomas and Tereza's relationship, she writes, “Teresa [sic] commands the loyalty of his soul, if not his body, by the strength of her love. But their bond is a burden which makes neither of them happy. She is tortured by jealousy; he sacrifices a promising career in Switzerland for her sake.” Kundera continually returns to the idea that Tereza came to Tomas because “someone had sent her downstream in a bulrush basket” (209); and he came to her by chance—a “chance in the absolute” (49). It seems to Tomas they were fated to be together.

Of the seven sections of the novel, two of the titles are repeated: “Lightness and Weight” and “Soul and Body.”⁹ Kundera draws a connection between lightness and weight and their intimate connection to the body and the soul—both of which are inseparable in his opinion. His poignant work creates a story in which the soul is figuratively oppressed by the weight of the body yet is at the same time “lighter than air” (5). This fateful combination allows for meaningful moments to be experienced during our lifetime but ultimately results in a meaningless existence.¹⁰ Both conditions, that of lightness and that of weight, involve suffering,

yet one is fulfilling and one is not. At one point, Kundera reveals that soul and body are irreconcilable because the body does what the soul does not want it to do—it betrays the soul: “but just make someone who has fallen in love listen to his stomach rumble, and the unity of body and soul, that lyrical illusion of the age of science, instantly fades away” (40). Kundera’s ideas become complicated as he admits that soul and body are inseparable yet irreconcilable. One way in which this notion is exemplified is when Tomas tries to explain to Tereza that body and soul are two separate things: “Tomas kept trying to convince [Tereza] that love and lovemaking were two different things. She refused to understand” (142). Likewise there are many instances in which Tereza and Sabina try to escape or look “past” their bodies to see their souls,¹¹ yet they realize that, while they cannot be reconciled, the two also cannot be separated. As Kundera explores the dichotomies of soul and body, he concedes that such complexities as the irreconcilability of soul and body are the drive behind our choices to live under lightness or weight.

The best way to understand how Kundera imagined his philosophy is to examine the four major characters around which he constructs it, as it cannot and is not meant to exist without them.¹² The character whom Kundera has given the most attention and significance is Tereza. It is mentioned countless times that she came to Tomas with her heavy suitcase and a copy of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* under her arm. It is no coincidence that *Anna Karenina* is the book Tereza carries with her when she arrives, unannounced or “uninvited” (29) into Tomas’s life. The story is one of love and betrayal, of womanizing, of lives shattered. This *is* the story of Tereza’s life. She must live with Tomas’s incessant womanizing. He betrays her over and over again by sleeping with his mistress and countless other women even after they are married: “[Her body] had lacked the power to become the only body in Tomas's life. It had disappointed and deceived

her [. . .] she had to inhale the aroma of another woman's groin from his hair!" (139). Tereza is haunted by this betrayal and finds it difficult to make sense of such love—of such a life (this is evident in her many nightmares, one in which involves a firing squad sent to kill her). Tereza was “born of a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience” (40). Not just betrayed by Tomas, Tereza carries the burden of her mother’s betrayal—her refusal to love Tereza: “she was willing to do anything to gain her mother’s love” (44) yet she never did. Instead, her mother leaves a “self-destructive [. . .] imprint on her [daughter]” (46). Maria Němcová Banerjee points out that “Tomas's love is her freedom,” yet she neglects to explain that Tomas's love is what is supposed to free her from the oppression of her mother’s lack of love, but it is also what leads her to give up her freedom. Tereza is intimately associated with weight; she is burdened by her own body and she is also Tomas's burden. Their love is a burden, or what the narrator calls Tomas's “*Es muss sein*” (32), illustrating the idea of necessity. Tomas was “hit by a weight the likes of which he had never known [. . .] For there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one's own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes” (31).

Tomas, on the other hand, is associated with lightness—he is the perfect counterpart to Tereza. Together, they somehow balance each other. Tomas fears responsibility and commitment, and tries to live under the sign of lightness by pursuing women as he pleases, not allowing any one person to weigh him down—until Tereza who, once she enters his life, is constantly “weighing him down” (28). When Tomas reflects on his wife and his mistress, Sabina, he comes to the conclusion that “Tereza and Sabina represented the two poles of his life, separate and irreconcilable, yet equally appealing” (28). He wants to have it all, unburdened by the weight of

responsibility, yet when Tereza leaves him, he is so melancholy that he must follow her. As Banerjee writes, “the choice between heaviness and lightness appears to Tomas as an absolute either/or” (203); which is why Tomas, even after he has taken in the “mysterious bulrush basket her found at the riverbank of his bed” (207), is still pondering the irrationality of this very act. In the rational mode of being, Tomas cannot willingly pursue lightness and also accept the weight Tereza brings. Tomas can, however, continue to pursue lightness while fate keeps him and Tereza together. Thus, “it is not Tomas who takes the decision but the decision that takes Tomas (207). Kundera reveals that when Tomas is alone just after Tereza has left him, he “felt the sweet lightness of being rise up to him out of the depths of the future,” (31), yet the very next day, fate leads him back to Tereza—to his “*es muss sein*.” For Tomas, “*es muss sein*” causes him to act against his rational instinct—to act in his own worst interest.¹³

Sabina and Franz parallel and even mirror Tereza and Tomas. Sabina, just like Tomas, seeks lightness and she does this primarily through betrayal: “Sabina was charmed more by betrayal than by fidelity” (91) and when she betrayed someone, “Sabina had the impression she had just scored a victory and someone invisible was applauding her for it” (98). And for Sabina, victory is lightness, but as Kundera points out in his reference to Parmenides, lightness may have represented something positive for Parmenides, but it is not necessarily so. Eventually, Sabina desires to end her betrayals: “she had longed to come to the end of the dangerous road of betrayals” (115). After all, “what fell to her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being” (122). By contrast, Franz, much like Tereza, longs for weight, fidelity, for a life that has great meaning. Once Sabina leaves Franz, his greatest desire is to be sacrificed for the sake of the human race. He seems to believe that this is the only way in which his life can be made significant. Contrary to Sabina's sense of victory that she achieves through betrayal, Franz's

words betray him and for him, this is no victory but ultimately his failure. As a professor, Franz is expected to successfully convey himself through his words (rather than actions). However, toward the end of the novel, he becomes aware that “in the end no words were precise, their meanings were obliterated, their content lost, they turned into trash, chaff, dust, sand; prowling through his brain, tearing at his head, they were his insomnia, his illness” (94). Because his words fail him, Franz believes his final chance to make his life count for something must be carried out through his actions which is why he joins the Grand March in Cambodia. He imagines himself dying while desperately trying to aid and defend the devastated country, yet, he dies not by an act of heroism, but an act of weakness. He is robbed and beaten while on his way home from his protest at The Grand March and he never recovers from his injuries. Tereza and Franz are both the physical manifestations of weakness, according to Kundera, while Tomas and Sabina embody strength. This idea becomes complicated, however, as we realize that Tereza is a character of great mental/emotional fortitude because she remains with Tomas despite his countless betrayals and her own betrayal by her body. In fact, the narrator reveals, “we all have a tendency to consider strength the culprit and weakness the innocent victim. But now in her case, Tereza realized the opposite was true! Even her dreams, as if aware of the single weakness in a man otherwise strong, made a display of her suffering to him” (310). Here, Kundera is again breaking down the barrier between opposites.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is a story in which beauty is intimately associated with betrayal, love is “unthinkable without violence (111), truth is found only in lies (113); these are just a few of the complex dichotomies the novel presents. According to Eric Parens, Kundera wants us to “suspect the binary oppositions with which we carve up the world.” Parens's point is especially relevant as it emphasizes Kundera's view that the entire world is just a series of

binaries, the greatest of which are lightness and weight. Kundera uses these binaries (happiness/sadness, strength/weakness, light/darkness, good/evil, etc.) as a way of understanding our world and in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, they are merely a starting point for exploring the larger psychological and social issues of our culture and the human condition. Kundera believes that we have the ability to choose, but that our choice will always involve one of these binaries. For example, we can either choose to live a life of happiness, though it may be filled with opposition, we can choose to be, on the whole, happy. Conversely, we may also choose to live a life that cannot overcome despair. Whether we choose one or the other, we have the freedom to make that choice. What we cannot choose, however, is what fate will bring into our lives.

Unleashing the Fullness of Kundera's Concepts

Kundera's philosophical perspective is a lens through which we can see our lives, not merely in terms of happiness and sadness, but as an opportunity to choose meaningful relationships despite whatever hardships fate may present us. Will we, like Sabina, choose lightness and, while parts of our life can be fulfilling, end up feeling as though our lives have been insignificant? Or will we choose weight like Tereza and though our lives may involve betrayal or may present many challenges, have a meaningful and fulfilling relationship? Kundera raises many questions with which all humans struggle, and films that illustrate those issues help us understand that the purpose of life, regardless of our circumstances, is to choose whether or not we will pursue meaningful relationships with others. Kundera, while he rejects the idea of eternal recurrence, personifies the longing for it through his characters. Sabina's hat becomes a recurring motif just as the butterfly does for Tereza. They long for recurrence and hope for it because "happiness is the longing for repetition" (298). For life to recur is for life to have

meaning according to Nietzsche. But for Kundera, the acceptance that life is fragile and that it will only occur once allows us to subvert our fate by accepting its uncertainty and mystery, thus choosing to have meaningful and fulfilling relationships with others.

In the very beginning of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera concedes that living life only once means it may as well have never happened at all, but as the novel progresses, he comes to the realization that fate does not dictate whether our lives can have meaning because we have the ability to choose. In the absence of eternal return, he argues:

We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come [. . .] There is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison. We live everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold. And what can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself? That is why life is always like a sketch. No, “sketch” is not quite the word, because sketch is an outline of something, the groundwork for a picture, whereas the sketch that is our life is a sketch for nothing, an outline with no picture [. . .] If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all (8).

Later, he describes “*Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*,” (32) or “the difficult resolution” illustrating that *schwer* means “difficult” and “heavy” and “the weighty resolution is at one with the voice of Fate (*Es muss sein!*); necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound: only necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy has value” (33). While our fate may weigh us down, so will “the weighty resolution” but the burden of love is the only value life has (value is meaning). Love “is our freedom. Love lies beyond *Es muss sein!*” (236). Love is the pursuit of value and meaning through our relationships with others—it is an outlet to invest in

these relationships and another way in which we can challenge our fate. As Kundera illustrates, Tereza's love for her dog Karenin is the most admirable kind of love because it is "voluntary." Because love is voluntary, it gives us the power to challenge our fate.

By the novel's end, Kundera returns to the idea of happiness, conceding that man cannot be happy because "happiness is the longing for repetition" (298). He argues that life is the absence of repetition, and cannot have meaning, he argues. Life then becomes a perpetual struggle for meaning that can never be attained, unless we seek and find it through love. Tereza's character most clearly illustrates the longing for repetition, and, as Maria Němcová Banerjee writes, "she is made to live the time of repetition" (214), through Tomas's perception of her as well as in Kundera's description of her. The text first presents her from Tomas's perspective and then later describes her as she envisions herself. Since life occurs only once, it can only have meaning at the moment it occurs, yet it is, just as weight, unbearable. In the end, Kundera simply reminds us that life cannot be made meaningful because we cannot relive it, but we can value the little time we have and pursue meaningful relationships as Tereza and Tomas do.¹⁴ That decision must be voluntary, however, and it is a weighty and difficult choice (*Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*) that often involves suffering and loss.

Film can help us rediscover dramatic relationships in our own lives and shows us how the main characters "improvise new possibilities in the real world of oppression" (Degenaar 52). Existential films such as Philip Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988) offers this kind of insight. It is one of those films that is not easily forgotten and that keeps the viewer thinking long after it has ended. While it has been criticized as an inaccurate representation of Kundera's novel, it adapts the events in a more linear fashion and brilliantly captures the essence of lightness and weight. In fact, Kaufman's film so beautifully captures Kundera's concepts that

we hardly notice the absence of the narrator's voice. Likewise, the music in the film helps to convey Kundera's authorial comments. As Kaufman has said, "because we eliminated the narrator, what the narrator says had to find its way back into the film. Sometimes it was spoken by the characters. Through Janacek's music, however, you get a sense of narrative line – of motifs and themes repeated" (qtd. In Degenaar 54). Film is an art entirely of its own and Kaufman's film visually portrays Kundera's ideas and concepts in a way that captures the essence and meaning of "the unbearable lightness of being."

The film adaptation is as poignant as Kundera's novel and captures his philosophical commentary even though the voice of the narrator is absent. Perhaps what is most striking about the film is the way in which it adapts authorial/narratorial moments from the novel and allows the characters themselves to speak them. In the novel, Tomas never says he wishes he had two lives and two chances to compare choices—it is the narrator who presents this idea. In the film adaptation, however, Thomas tells Sabina, "If I had two lives, in one life I could invite [Tereza] to stay at my place and in the second life I could kick her out. Then I could compare and see which had been the best thing to do. But we only live once. Life's so light." Likewise, in both works, the reader/viewer is already aware by the end that Tomas and Tereza have died; nevertheless, both end with visions of their happiness. Even though they are faced with many undesirable circumstances, they are able to find freedom in the country away from the betrayal. It is only while they live in the countryside that they can truly be happy because Tomas has ceased to have affairs. Both works capture the essence of Kundera's philosophy—Degenaar says that "Tomas succeeds in celebrating the lightness of being while Tereza experiences this lightness as unbearable, since she represents the weight of continuity and responsibility" (55). Which is better? Lightness or weight? While Kundera's novel seems more concerned with

posing difficult questions, Kaufman's film captures the core of them and his goal seems more concerned with presenting difficult solutions that arise out of life's difficult choices. Both works are art and poetry in their own right and both offer insight into the human condition in a way that leaves us pondering the difficult questions and realities they present.

While Nietzsche's idea of eternal return arose out of his need to explain existence after “the death of God,” Kundera's philosophy becomes the way in which he can justify an oppressive world in which fate looms heavily over our lives. Many of Nietzsche's preliminary concepts are present in Kundera's novel and hover as Kundera constructs the framework of his own theory. There may be no chance to repeat life, and living a life in the absence of eternal recurrence may render it meaningless according to Kundera, but embracing the counter-forces of life (or meeting them with some sort of resistance) allows the characters to escape the crushing prospect of their fates. By having the choice of whether to live a life of lightness or one of weight, the characters in Kundera's world are able to put to rest the question of whether life has meaning. Instead, they can either embrace or subvert their own fates and choose whether significance can be found in weight, like Tomas does, or if it lies in the pursuit of lightness, like Sabina does. The three films examined henceforth, *Mammoth* (2009), *The Hours* (2002), and *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven* (2007) illustrate characters who contend with fate much like those in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The question of whether they will choose to subvert their fate is one that is best asked within the framework of Kundera's existentialism.

These films unlock and explain Kundera's philosophical framework with more conviction than his novel does. They both expand and also show more assertively his concepts of lightness and weight and how they enrich our understand of them and of these films. By seeing the actual lives of the characters who try to maintain autonomy in a world of oppressive fate, we

are given a more comprehensive look into Kundera's fundamental dichotomies. The impact is a more intimately engaging view and understanding of them and of how we can overcome the fear of living in a world in which life only occurs once and then disappears "once and for all, like a shadow without weight, dead in advance"(3).

Furthermore, it is difficult to see the full breadth of these categories within Kundera's novel because he has created only two character types; the two he considers strong and the two he considers to be weak. However, to remove them from the context of Kundera's novel and to use them to look at other works unlocks the different ways that lightness and weight function and illustrates the complexities of these two terms. Likewise, using them to analyze films visualizes the nuances of human behavior that oftentimes words fail to capture. The novel claims to have illuminated "all aspects of the human existence," yet it is difficult to make such a claim when it centers on only two character types. While *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* may not have illuminated *all* aspects of human existence, using its philosophical framework to look at other works can illuminate many different types of human existence as the characters in these films represent different economic and social backgrounds. The broad spectrum of character types illustrates the different ways that they respond to lightness and weight.

In the remaining chapters of this thesis, I plan to use Kundera's concepts of lightness and weight and the eternal return as a lens through which to look at three films that visually convey his ideas. All three films feature intercutting stories of several characters whose struggles with love, freedom, and death make up the meaning of their lives. The concepts will become a tool for character analysis, especially within an existentialist framework, as well as a means of philosophical exploration of characters' choices, motivations, and relationships with others. Using Kundera's concepts and applying them to other works, especially films, does not just

allow for a comprehensive study of characters and their existentialist choices, but is also a valuable tool for examining the larger psychological and social issues of our culture.

CHAPTER 2

Mammoth (2009):

Discovering the Weight and Value of Our Relationships

Lukas Moodysson's *Mammoth* (2009) is a brilliant work of visual artistry that consists of three distinct, interwoven narratives. In the first narrative, we are introduced to Leo and Ellen Vidales, a married couple living in New York, their daughter Jackie and their live-in nanny Gloria. Ellen is an ER surgeon and her main commitment is to her work, where she feels the weight of responsibility in saving or losing lives. She struggles with balancing the time her work demands and the time her daughter needs, and she longs for more time to connect with her family. Leo is the designer of a successful internet gaming site, and one of the two frame narratives that the film features follows his business trip to Thailand during which he signs a million-dollar contract for his website. While Leo is in Thailand, he also has an affair with a Thai native named Cookie whose life turns out to be strangely similar to his own. Gloria cares for Jackie while Ellen and Leo are working and treats her as though she were her own daughter. The second frame narrative takes place in the Philippines, where Gloria's two sons, Salvador and Manuel, reside with Gloria's mother. The young boys are distressed by their mother's absence, calling her repeatedly and pleading with her to return home. As the narratives progress, we witness the characters trying to assert themselves against forces beyond their control and their actions and behavior visualize Kundera's concepts of lightness and weight. Examining the film using Kundera's philosophical framework allows for an in-depth character analysis and illustrates how the characters struggle to give significance to their lives.

Moodysson's film exemplifies the importance of human connectedness, while presenting the notion that only by experiencing life's challenges can the characters discover and understand

that weight is desirable. In illustrating this message, the film opens with the Vidales family laughing and playing happily together. When all three are together, their lives are given weight and significance through their relationship with each other. But when they are apart, they each discover a sense of lightness that creates a longing for the weight of family and togetherness. While Leo is away, he and Ellen talk on the phone several times, but they are burdened by being separated. Likewise, Gloria and her children struggle with their feelings of disconnectedness and long to be reunited. Gloria's mother pressures her to stay in the United States where she can earn money to give her sons a better life. For her mother, this creates weight, but Gloria comes to realize that being with her children, even if they will have little money and fewer opportunities, is more important.¹⁵ While at times there is a hovering sense of despair, the film shows that confronting the position of our lives and accepting weight can be cathartic.

The title, *Mammoth*, is significant because it suggests both weight and the search for something precious, something mythical. While the word "mammoth" means immensely large, huge, enormous,¹⁶ it also reflects a great and heavy weight (as in the animal). On the plane en route to Bangkok, Thailand, Leo's business associate gives him a pen with mammoth's ivory in it, telling him that it is worth \$3000— and calls it the “world's finest pen.”¹⁷ The ivory that belongs to what was once a great creature has been repurposed into an object that has no inherent value. Leo later gives the pen to Cookie, but when she tries to sell it, she is not able to get much money for it. In addition to the weight the title suggests, *Mammoth* also implies something mythical; mammoths have long since been extinct, but their ivory still remains. When Leo is exploring Thailand, he sees an elephant on the side of the road, but it is chained to the ground, unable to move. Leo calls Ellen, and describes, very enthusiastically, his encounter to her. The elephant fascinates Leo because it is so commanding and because it reminds him of the

mythological mammoth, whose only trace of existence is now the inlay of a pen his business associate has given him.¹⁸ This episode illustrates that perhaps what Leo is searching for in life is also something mythical. The mammoth's ivory and the elephant both capitalize on the fantasy that there is some way to retrieve a mythical steadfastness or firmness on the ground like that of the elephant, but this option is not available. At the same time, the elephant also reminds Leo of its inability to move because of the chains that restrain it. Leo is conflicted by his desire for solid footing on the ground—for this continuity—and by his desire to be carefree. When he calls Ellen to tell her about his mythical encounter he says that they need to take some time off and go somewhere together. He tells her, "I really feel the need to do that," which foreshadows that in the end, he will decide that his life is too light and that it needs more weight, which is right there at home in the company of Ellen and Jackie. Their togetherness creates the weight that he desires.

The question of how the characters will respond to lightness and weight remains in the foreground throughout *Mammoth* as the characters' actions and behavior illustrate the pursuit to make their lives meaningful. Equating meaning with value, the film draws our attention to things that are often expensive but have no value and associates them with the each character's search for meaning. Gloria is pressured by her mother that money for her children is where value lies. Without money, Gloria cannot provide a better life for her children. During several telephone conversations between the two, Gloria doubts whether remaining in the United States to earn more money for her children will be beneficial. Her mother urges her that there is no other option and that she must remain strong. Likewise, Leo doubts whether money is the way to acquire true value. He and Ellen both make a lot of money, but they have to spend much time working in order to do so. As a result, they miss precious family time. When Leo departs on his business trip

to Thailand, Ellen pleads with him to spend some more time with her before he has to go, disappointed that they have so little time together. Furthermore, after Leo has said goodbye to Jackie, he grabs her one last time and says he is going to put her in his suitcase and take her with him. Their parting is a poignant moment and their longing for more time is nearly palpable. When Leo arrives at a fancy hotel in Thailand, he opts to leave, aware that money cannot provide the lightness he seeks. Instead, he decides to stay in a hut on the beach that has none of the amenities of the fancy hotel but that offers seclusion and will lead him to the real and unfiltered experience of the country. It is during this time that Leo gives away the pen with mammoth's ivory, because he believes it will help Cookie financially. Ironically, it has no value; the mythical steadfastness that the mammoth represents is not something that can be purchased. Instead, this esoteric ideal can only be achieved when the person seeking it recognizes that this steadfastness can only be achieved through actions and choices and cannot be bought.

The nonlinear narrative technique creates a disjointed sense of time in the film, emphasizing that time is weight but its value is deceptive. All of the characters in *Mammoth* long for more time together. Time is more valuable than any object or any amount of money. Salvador and Manuel are crushed by their lack of time with their mother and likewise she has difficulty coping with her absence from their lives. Ellen and Leo both desire more time to spend with each other and with Jackie. While the film illustrates the longing for more time, the rapid intercutting of the different narratives emphasizes that time is a counter-force that oppresses the characters. The rapid switch from one narrative to the next exemplifies the characters' own sense that time moves too quickly; as they desire more time, it proves as elusive as Kundera's "eternal return." As the characters fight the oppressive force of time they search for value in trying to make their lives meaningful. Ultimately they all discover that neither time, nor money nor objects of

supposed value can help them to acquire meaning; it is achieved only through their relationships with each other.

While the film suggests that weight is desirable, it also illustrates that there are counterforces, such as Time, that oppress the characters. Just as the characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are often oppressed by fate, the characters in *Mammoth* try to assert themselves against fate and other forces outside of their control. Early in the film, when Gloria takes Jackie to the planetarium, it becomes apparent that they both feel oppressed—Gloria because of her mother's pressure, and Jackie because she has no control that her parents are away as often as they are. While they watch a film about the planets and the solar system, they look at each other with sadness and longing during the narration "constantly rising and falling from the gravity force of our moon" which functions as a metaphor for their lives. They are physically oppressed by gravity but—especially Gloria—emotionally by their inability to choose whether they can have more time with their families. As they hold hands, the narration continues with, "if it weren't for this fragile cocoon [the biosphere], our planet would be as dry and lifeless as our nearest neighbors in the solar system," and their grasp tightens. The words "rising" and "falling" and "force" all indicate weight and hardship. The characters try to rise, not to be oppressed by their emotional "gravity," yet the force of gravity, of life, weighs them back down, creating feelings of longing and loneliness. Despite feeling burdened, both Gloria and Jackie feel that their relationship has weight, which is illustrated in the tightening of their grasp as they hold hands while the narrator describes the force of gravity. While gravity functions as an oppressive force on one level, it also indicates something positive, as gravity is what keeps us from falling into oblivion. Gloria recognizes that while she feels helpless against forces like time, and while she feels she did not choose to be separated from her family, there is substance in her

relationship with Jackie. And even though Jackie is not oppressed like Gloria is, she instinctively recognizes the burden Gloria feels. Through this understanding and through their relationship with each other, they find affirmation.

Salvador, Gloria's eldest son, feels pressured by his younger brother Manuel to find a way to bring their mother home for good; he is distressed by his inability to make her return. The most difficult scene to bear is when Salvador's grandmother takes him to an enormous trash dump and shows him that he is not really oppressed. In the scene, very young children must scavenge for anything remotely usable. His grandmother explains that their entire lives revolve around whether or not they can make a living off the garbage and waste. If they become sick, they will die. Salvador's response to what he has been shown, instead of diminishing his feeling that he is oppressed, strengthens his desire to bring his mother home. He decides that the only way he can do this is to find work so that he can earn enough money to let his mother come home. Later, Gloria returns home after she learns that Salvador has been gravely injured. In attempting to bring his mother home, he sneaks out of the house one night to look for work in town and he is led home by an older man who we find out the next morning has raped him and left him for dead. Salvador's tragedy makes Gloria realize once and for all that that true weight is remaining with her children.

While Gloria, Jackie, and Salvador feel restricted because they are not really given much choice, Leo and Ellen are able to more freely explore what gives life significance and whether they will pursue lightness or weight. Ellen feels pressured because she must devote much of her time to her work which leaves little for her family. Ellen pursues weight through her job because she thinks that her ability to save lives is what gives significance and weight to her own life. She tells Leo that she feels this weight on her chest: "I can't sleep. I'm dying to relax. I don't know.

I'm desperate. My heart just rises to the top of my chest and I can't stop it." Although Ellen has more control over her life than Jackie and Gloria seem to, she still feels pressured by her work where she is often responsible for the lives of others. Even though it is entirely out of her control whether her patients live or die, it is a difficult burden to bear. In one scene, a young boy is brought to the emergency room and we find out he has been stabbed multiple times by his own mother. Ellen is horrified that the boy's mother is the one responsible for stabbing him and she tells Leo that she kept thinking "it could have been Jackie" and that she does not understand how anyone could ever do that to a child. After Ellen loses the boy, she realizes that in pursuing weight through her work, she has missed out on time with her own daughter, so she tries to reconnect with Jackie by buying her a telescope. When Ellen she gives it to her, she is in the middle of learning Tagalong with Gloria. Instead of going with Ellen to look at the stars from the rooftop of their apartment building, Jackie says she would prefer to finish the lesson in Tagalong first. At this point, the camera zooms in for a close-up, focusing on Ellen's sadness and longing. In order to find the weight and significance she has been searching for, she realizes that her family must reconnect.

Unlike Ellen, Leo pursues lightness after his encounter with the chained elephant. After he arrives at the humble beach bungalow he has traded for the fancy hotel in which he was supposed to stay, he decides to explore Thailand on his own, carefree. The first night he is there, he talks to some guys in a bar and tells them "I don't want to think about going home. I decided to leave everything behind and just travel. It's just too much you know?" While he is in the company of these strangers, he arrives at a strip club and stares at an innocent-looking girl. Just after this, he walks through the back of the club and discovers a small room with a small bed that has stuffed animals on it. In pursuing lightness, Leo is brought to a place where he begins to

realize that his life is too light. Just after he discovers the room, he meets another young-looking girl whose name is Cookie. She asks him why he looks so sad. She says, “You want fun time?” He says no. Then she asks him three times, “You don’t like fun?” And he tells her “You know what, I want to have fun time.” But instead of having a “fun time,” (which Leo decides is too light), he sends Cookie home with some money and returns to his beach bungalow to call Ellen. He tells her that he has been thinking that he needs to do some charity work, and that he cannot help but think the entire human race will die out soon. Leo’s remark suggests his awareness that there is only one chance to make life meaningful, echoing Kundera’s rejection of the eternal return.

As Leo grapples with the question of what gives life significance, he vacillates between pursuing fun activities and thinking that he needs to do more with his life. The following day, after his conversation with Ellen in which he tells her that he wants to make his life more substantial by doing charity work, he decided to spend another lighthearted day, exploring Thailand with his new friend Cookie. During the day, they ride around, carefree as if they are the only two people in the world. After their adventure, Cookie takes Leo to pray at a temple where they engage in a hypothetical discussion about the next life as well as about their past lives. During their temple visit, both Cookie and Leo seem to be searching for weight. Leo realizes that his life is too insignificant and that meaning must lie in something deeper and more spiritual. Leo asks Cookie if she believes in reincarnation and she says yes. Then she tells him that her monk told her that she was an elephant in a past life. While the camera closes in on Leo’s face, his awareness that he needs more weight in his life again resurfaces. Later that night, they make love and Leo says he’s going to travel and asks Cookie if she wants to go with him sailing around the world. In posing this question to Cookie, Leo attempts one last time to imagine a life in which he

has no worries or troubles. He tells her, “let’s pretend we’re the only people in the universe,” reaching one last time for the lightness that he thinks provides the answer to finding freedom. Leo finally decides, however, that lightness is too insignificant, so he sneaks away the next morning while Cookie is still asleep. He calls his business associate and tells him that he does not care whether the contract sells for forty million or even thirty million, but that he has had enough and is ready to sign it. Leo has finally decided that returning to his family and reconnecting with them is what will give his life weight. Likewise, after Cookie awakes and realizes that Leo is gone, she calls her daughter because she understands that her momentary pursuit of lightness has taken away the desirable weight in her life—her relationship with her family—and she decides to rekindle her relationship with her daughter.

Also indicative of Leo's temptation to pursue lightness are the many scenes in which he is looking out of a window. His behavior mirrors that of Tomas in the beginning of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* when the narrator recalls, “I have been thinking about Tomas for many years [. . .] I saw him standing at the window of his flat and looking across the courtyard at the opposite walls, not knowing what to do” (6). Just as Tomas is burdened by his love for Tereza, so is Leo by his desire for lightness. Looking out of the window is symbolic of Leo's searching for something different, something mythical. Yet, as the film progresses, it becomes apparent that the pursuit of lightness does not bring freedom, but reinforces that Leo's life needs more weight. The non-diegetic music that plays during these significant scenes echoes Kundera's philosophy through the repetition of the lyrics, “untired and weightless/ unconscious as we cross.”¹⁹ At first, Leo pursues this weightlessness, but later realizes that it is weight that he desires.

While both Ellen and Leo have the means to choose to pursue either lightness or weight,

Gloria seems trapped under the pressure of having to provide a better life for her children and likewise by her mother's pressure for her to "stay strong" and her insistent reminder that she can handle it. Because Gloria does not come home, her son Salvador inherits the same feeling of pressure that she feels. Her mother leads her to believe that her time apart from her family is worth it because she will make a better life for them. Salvador believes that if he finds work, he can convince his mother to come home. When he finally realizes that his pleas will not bring her back, he decides to look for work, thinking that if he earns money, she will come home. Salvador realizes that his words fail him and he must then rely on his actions if he hopes to bring his mother home. Just like Franz who finds that even though he is an academic scholar and university professor, his words are meaningless—"in the end no words were precise, their meanings were obliterated" (Kundera 98)—Salvador realizes that he can only rely on his actions to produce meaning. Unfortunately, his search for work leads to his being raped, abandoned, and left for dead, just like Franz who is brutally beaten and left to die. The heartbreaking irony in the film is that Gloria's absence is a result of her desire to provide a better life for her children. But in her absence, her son is irreparably damaged.

In their discovery of what gives life meaning, the characters all suffer loss, but through this they realize that their families are what give their lives weight, and weight is where true value lies. Before the film even begins, its title already speaks to the idea of weight. As we see the narratives unfold, we realize that people from all different social classes and ethnicities struggle with how to give significance and value to their lives. As the film comes to a close, we see the Vidales family reunited, playing happily as they had in the beginning. Shortly thereafter, as the camera zooms in for the final time, Ellen and Leo embrace each other, with Jackie in their arms. Their expressions indicate their painful experiences and loss, but their embrace suggests

that they have discovered that to give their lives weight, they must devote time to their relationship with each other. Kundera suggests that "we believe that the greatness of man stems from the fact that he *bears* his fate as Atlas bore the heavens on his shoulders" (33), and as the film ends, the Vidales family understands that fate has oppressed them with some painful circumstances, but they can subvert that fate through their love for each other.

CHAPTER 3

The Hours (2002):

The Oppression of Fate and the Unbearable Choice

The Hours (2002) is a portrait of the lives of three women whose narratives are interwoven. The common thread of the three stories is Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf writes the novel in one portrait, while Laura Brown, a 1950s housewife reads it in a second portrait. In the third and final portrait, we are introduced to Clarissa Vaughn, who is a modern-day Clarissa Dalloway, and whose closest friends sometimes call her Mrs. Dalloway. The film opens with Virginia Woolf's story. During this narrative, Virginia is a recipient of the "rest cure" and she is supposed to remain at home at all times. The rest cure, created by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell famous was used to treat women who had severe nervous symptoms to include patients diagnosed as hypochondriacs, hysterics, and most commonly, neurasthenics. The treatment often entailed that the patient, usually a woman, be secluded, away from her home, unable to do anything for herself—she must relinquish all control to her physician.²⁰ Virginia's story is one of a woman who has no choice in how she is treated. Laura Brown, on the other hand, has a very affectionate husband and lives in an affluent neighborhood, but she struggles with depression and finds it difficult to reconcile her seemingly perfect life with her feelings of despair. Clarissa's life seems more hopeful than that of Virginia or Laura, but she suffers the loss of her dear friend Richard. At first, the film seems rather disjointed as it cross-cuts rapidly among the three stories, but it soon becomes apparent that the common thread among these women is their struggle to give meaning to their lives which they think they think can only be achieved if they attain happiness. While in Moodysson's *Mammoth* the characters' final realization is that weight is value and is thereby desirable, the women of Daldry's

adaptation discover that weight can often be too oppressive.

The film's title *The Hours* denotes time, but it also suggests linearity; time continues to move forward regardless of what happens to us. Near the end of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera poignantly concedes "therein lies the whole of man's plight. Human time does not turn in a circle; it runs ahead in a straight line. That is why man cannot be happy: happiness is the longing for repetition" (298). Stephen Daldry, just like Kundera before him, questions whether happiness can be achieved, and if it cannot, what gives significance to our lives. In a review of the film, Rob White draws attention to this very notion, explaining:

We come to realize that their intimate relationships, no matter how deeply they're rooted in love, are debilitating. Virginia is chided by her husband Leonard and sister Vanessa for not eating or for forgetting her history of mental illness. Laura can hardly cope with her doting, demanding young son Richie and her kind but conventional husband. Clarissa adores Richard, who has Aids, and has nursed him for years; but he can say, without a care for the impact, that he's only staying alive to please her. (45)

As the hours pass, the film questions whether its characters can subvert the force of fate that seeks to subjugate them and whether they can find happiness despite that fate.

Daldry, like Kundera, explores the idea of choice. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, choice is a complicated notion. On the one hand, Kundera posits that we are capable of choosing lightness or weight. On the other hand, fate can determine that choice as well. Tereza does not seem to be given the choice to love Tomas or to remain with him even after his continual affairs with Sabina and other women. In one of the most heart-wrenching moments of the novel, we get a glimpse of how Tereza truly struggles with the notion of her own weakness and the inability to

choose. She has a nightmare that she is marched up a hill by a group of men who have rifles and who plan to execute her. One of the men says to her, “To avoid an error, this was *your* choice, wasn't it?” and Tereza, while she thinks the easy answer would be to tell him it was not her choice, she also does not want to disappoint Tomas (her deep love—debilitating love) and so she affirms, “Yes, of course. It was my choice” (148) Moments later, “her weakness drove her to despair, but she could do nothing to counteract it [exclaiming] ‘But it wasn't my choice’ (150). After she escapes execution, she realizes, “Someone had to help her, after all! Tomas wouldn't. Tomas was sending her to her death. Someone else would have to help her!” (151). Tereza despairs that Tomas will not help her, but she never names who “someone else” might be. Her soul, her conscious being, is unable to choose because she is afraid of losing her opportunity to find happiness. Yet her body, her unconscious being, does choose. It chooses for her to stay with Tomas and to live with betrayal and to love deeply in spite of everything. In Daldry's film, choice is also complicated. On the one hand, Virginia does not choose to be subjected to the rest cure and Richard does not choose for his mother to abandon him. On the other hand, however, they choose to commit suicide. Their suicides are the only way they can take back the power of choice.

Considering Tereza as a building block and model for the three women of *The Hours* allows for a deeper understanding of Daldry's characters and likewise demonstrates just how his work can be read through a Kunderian lens. Many times throughout *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza is portrayed as one who is victim to a world in which she has no choice over matters of the soul. After all, Tomas comes to her by absolute chance—their love is the result of a chance meeting—and later when she decides to leave him, he follows her back to Prague: “because of her, he had changed his destiny. Now he would no longer be responsible for her; now

she was responsible for him” (77). Tereza has control over her body, but even body continually betrays her at the soul's behest. The most prominent image of Tereza is one of her “sent downstream in a bulrush basket” (209), which is but one example of the several times this is mentioned. Tereza is helpless like the baby Moses and so it becomes Tomas’s responsibility to take care of her. It is continually mentioned that Tereza is a weight for Tomas. She weighs him down; she showed up with a heavy suitcase. And yet Kundera points out that “Not even one's own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes” (31). Just as Kundera posits the idea that our relationships with one another are heavy because we share the pain and burden of those we love, Daldry also conveys this complicated emotion and behavior in the lives of his three women, Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughn. All three women suffer because of the burden of their love. They are betrayed by their “*Es muss sein*,” they love deeply and yet they cannot find happiness.

While Tereza is consciously unable to choose whether or not her soul will continue to betray her, Laura has the conscious power to choose and admits to choosing life.²¹ In the end of *The Hours* (2002) after her son Richard has committed suicide by jumping out of the window of his apartment, she visits Clarissa and tells her that she feels unworthy that she survived and her children did not. Because the weight of her relationship with her husband and son became too heavy, she felt the only choice was to abandon her children. Her agony is nearly palpable as she tells Clarissa, “there are times that you think you don’t belong and that you’re going to kill yourself.” She tells her it would be wonderful to say she regretted leaving her family but “what does it mean to regret when you have no choice? It’s what you can bear. There it is. No one’s going to forgive me. It was death. I chose life.” She is given two choices: life or death. Yet, while

she admits to choosing life, she also explains that she really had no choice. Laura's debilitating love can only lead her to death, so she abandons her family in order to survive. The final portrait of this woman is not one of a person who is a survivor or of one who has overcome something but one of a broken woman who felt as though remaining with her family would be the death of her, but whose life has been filled with regret; she has outlived her family, and her son, unlike her, chooses death. Because Laura feels oppressed by her husband and her son, she decides she must leave them to survive. As we hear her final words, the emptiness she feels leads us to believe she feels as though her life, absent of love, of family, has been meaningless. And now that her family is dead, there is no way to reconcile that.

Just like Laura, Virginia faces an "irresolvable dilemma"²² in which her life feels like a prison and she feels the only way to escape this prison is through death. During one of the most agonizing moments of the film, Virginia goes to the train station and her panicked husband Leonard runs after her and asks her why she has left. Her response is that she did not want to disturb him. Grieved by her decision, Leonard exclaims that she disturbs him by disappearing. In attempting to calm Virginia and bring her home, Leonard reminds her that there is an obligation to be home in time for dinner to which she replies, "there is no such obligation." "I have endured this imprisonment...I am attended by doctors who inform me of my own interests." In response, Leonard indicates that Virginia may not be the best judge of her own condition and she emphatically asks, "who is a better judge?! My life has been stolen from me . . . I am living a life I have no wish to live. How did this happen?" In attempting to defend herself, Virginia reveals that she also lives with the threat of her extinction and that she lives alone in the "deep dark" and that only she can know her condition. Echoing Kundera's existentialism, Virginia finally tells Leonard, "you cannot find peace by avoiding life" Likewise, we cannot discover whether weight

or lightness is more desirable if we refuse to combat fate. Virginia, much like Tereza, feels trapped, imprisoned, by her life and by her love for Leonard where she is forced to remain at home and to live in the country where she has no desire to live. While Virginia later admits in a note to Leonard that she has been very happy with him, in this scene she expresses that she cannot be happy by being hid away in the country. Even though Leonard loves Virginia and acts as he does out of concern for her, his decision to move her to the country and his constant questioning her actions and motives—to include asking whether she has eaten or had enough rest—causes Virginia to feel imprisoned.

Oppressed by her confinement, Virginia is able to gain some sense of control through writing her novel. For Virginia, the weight of her confinement is too heavy, but the stability she feels through her writing allows her to experience lightness temporarily as she is able to enter the creative realm and forget about the weight of her physical life. In a scene that occurs simultaneously with Woolf's realization that her heroine must live, we see Laura Brown contemplate taking an entire bottle of pills, but then she changes her mind. At this moment, Laura Brown chooses life and Virginia says, "I was going to kill my heroine. But I've changed my mind." By allowing her heroine to live and to make the choice to leave her family—to leave the source of her oppression—Virginia is able to have some control over her life even if it is only through her protagonist. Later, when Virginia's sister leaves, she asks her if she seems better, beseeching her, "do you think I may one day escape" to which her sister rather fearfully and unconvincingly responds with a weak yes and a feeble nod of her head. In this moment, Virginia and her sister seem aware that the only way to escape imprisonment, or her unbearable lightness of being, is through death. The film both opens and closes with Virginia drowning herself. And the last words that we hear are Virginia's farewell to Leonard in a letter that she has left: "to look

life in the face... to love it for what it is and then to put it away...always the years between us. Always the love. Always the hours.”

Virginia’s final words confirm what Kundera believes about life—that it is a trap. He illustrates that the novel is not the author’s confession but “an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become” (221). The world is perhaps a trap, imprisoning those like Tereza and Virginia. Kundera observes that between life and death, neither is better or easier. They are two equally difficult choices that exist within an untenable situation. Choosing death may perhaps end suffering for the individual but the loved ones who remain suffer because of it. Tereza tries to escape the world’s trap, or the burden of her love for Tomas and his betrayal, by returning to Prague because her “return to Prague is an expression of despair akin to an act of suicide” (220).²³ Likewise, Laura chooses life and in so doing, she has to desert her family. Yet she ends up alone and deeply unhappy. Moreover, she abandons her son who cannot reconcile her abandonment, or a mother who did not love him enough to stay, with the love that Clarissa (a mother-like figure) feels for him. When she arrives to escort him to a party that she is holding to honor a prestigious award he has won for his novel, he is standing by the window and yells to her not to come near him. When Clarissa insists that he doesn’t have to do anything he doesn’t want to do he declares, “but I still have to face the hours. I’ve stayed alive for you but now you have to let me go.” He utters “I’m afraid I can’t make it to the party...you’ve been so good to me Mrs. Dalloway. I love you. I don’t think two people could have been happier than we’ve been,” and then jumps out of the window to his death. Even though he claims that he could not have been happier, the cherished moments he shared with Clarissa could not help him escape the haunting distress of his childhood abandonment and the pain he endures because of AIDS. While he

“struggles to be what he is expected to be,” that is, to be courageous in overcoming these fateful circumstances, he “also begs to be set free from this life become prison,” (Charles 309).

Clarissa seems to pursue lightness in the beginning of *The Hours*, but as the film progresses, we learn that she attempts to counteract the weight she feels by engaging in carefree activities such as party planning and buying flowers. While in the beginning of the film Clarissa seems charismatic and happy, we quickly realize that she lives under the burden of weight—the weight of caring for Richard and the weight of coping with his death in the end. In order to assert herself against this weight, Clarissa plans a party for Richard. In planning the party, she attempts to subvert the burden of caring for a friend while knowing that he is dying. In the beginning when Clarissa is talking to Richard about the party she is throwing for him, he tries to tell her that he thinks he is only staying alive for her benefit. At this point, the audience is not yet aware that Richard will later repeat this statement more forcefully just before his suicide. Clarissa’s response indicates her position within the relationship and likewise the way she views life. She says, “that’s what we do. People stay alive for each other.” Her burden is that she believes it is our responsibility to stay alive for those we love, whether or not that will foster happiness or fulfillment. Furthermore, she believes that Richard should stay alive for her and she for him. Her whole life now revolves around caring for Richard, but neither one is happy. Richard, in staying alive for her, suffers under the burden of reliving his mother’s abandonment because Clarissa acts like the mother that he never had. In the same way, Clarissa feels the burden of knowing that she and Richard are far beyond their happiest moments (which occurred many years ago) and essentially, we are lead to believe that they can never be happy again—that time has passed. The hours go on whether or not we want them to—whether or not we are happy. Richard realizes

how deeply Clarissa believes that they must stay alive for each other, for those they love when he assures her that “I don’t think two people could have been happier than we’ve been.”

While *The Hours* is a story of debilitating love, just like that of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, it demonstrates that the weight of our relationships can often become debilitating. Laura, the character who ends up utterly alone, deeply regrets leaving her family and laments that she is the sole survivor of her family, as both her husband and her two children have already died. In her moment of distress, she believed she only had two options: to die or to leave her family. But in her old age she realizes that living alone, without loving relationships with others, no matter how debilitating that love may be, is itself death. Both Richard and Virginia realize that while they have been living in a prison, their lives were given meaning through their relationship with their loved ones, which is why both of them express that no one could have been happier than they have been. The characters in Daldry’s film are metaphorically imprisoned and immobilized by their debilitating love. There may be no way to discover true happiness, yet, as Virginia says, to accept and to love life for what it is can at least allow for closure. Likewise, this acceptance allows the characters to subvert their fate. Instead of letting their oppression and imprisonment crush them, they embrace the happy moments they shared.

CHAPTER 4

Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven (2007):

The Weight of Redemption

Fatih Akin's *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven* (2007), which won best screenplay at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, is a heartbreaking and inspiring depiction of relationships, of suffering and loss, and of the freedom and redemption that can be experienced through love and forgiveness. The story characterizes two mother-daughter relationships and one between a father and son and cross cuts three distinct narratives titled "Yeter's Tod," "Lottes Tod" and finally "Auf der anderen Seite."²⁴ In the first narrative "Yeter's Tod", we are introduced to Yeter, a Turkish woman who lives in Bremen, Germany, and works as a prostitute to earn money so that her daughter can attend University—an opportunity she did not have. While working, she meets a Turkish immigrant and widower named Ali, who propositions her to quit her job and get paid to live with and take care of him. One night, Ali's son Nejat visits and makes it apparent that he dislikes the idea of living with a woman of "easy virtue." In the second narrative "Lottes Tod", Yeter's daughter Ayten is seen running from an officer in plain clothes who drops a handgun which she quickly grabs and hides on a rooftop. As a member of a Turkish Communist resistance group, Ayten is in danger of imprisonment and so she flees Turkey and arrives in Bremen, Germany where she briefly stays with some political allies until she can no longer pay for her room and board. The allies kick her out and she begins the search for her mother, tragically unaware that she is already dead. While there, Ayten meets a student at the University of Bremen named Lotte who is fascinated by Ayten's story and who empathizes with the political persecution she has endured. Lotte convinces her mother Susanne to fight for political asylum for Ayten, and when Germany refuses to grant it, Ayten is extradited back to

Turkey and imprisoned for political rebellion where Lotte follows her to fight for her freedom. In the final narrative, “Auf der anderen Seite”, Nejat, Ali’s son, travels to Turkey, meets and befriends Susanne, whose daughter Lotte has recently been killed, and eventually reconnects with his estranged father. As the film progresses, it illustrates that forgiveness is weight and that forgiveness lead to redemption, if only the characters can make it to “the other side.”

The title of the film is literally translated as “on the other side” but the English translation is “The Edge of Heaven.” The difference in these two phrases is quite profound as one connotes a different location or perspective, and the other something mythical and otherworldly. The English title “evoke[s] . . . the boundary between heaven and earth,” but the German title “bear[s] no explicit cosmological meaning, only the polysemy of ‘this side’ and ‘the other side.’”²⁵ Both titles work, however, within Akin’s framework because “on the other side” speaks to the redemption of Susanne, Ayten and Nejat, all of whom have been reconciled by the film’s end. “The edge of heaven,” likewise shows that while the world is cruel and chaotic and people are faced with opposition against which they have little choice, much like in Daldry’s *The Hours*, forgiveness and meaningful relationships will bring us to the *edge* of heaven, offering redemption. In a review of the film in *The New York Times*, A. O. Scott writes that while geographical and general distances grow wider, “at the same time, as the lives of the characters cross and entwine, there is a sense of human connections becoming stronger and thicker, of a fragile moral order coalescing beneath the randomness and cruelty of modern life. And even as the movie bristles with violence — accidental and systematic, sexual and political — its tone is curiously gentle.” Though the film deals with the same themes as *Mammoth* (2009) and *The Hours* (2002), it offers redemption and from this redemption arises a freedom that is explicitly absent in the previous two films.

While there is a sense of impending death and imprisonment in Akin's film, just like in *The Hours*, there is also a sense of hope and redemption in the end that parallels Tomas and Tereza's final moments together in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. As Kundera recalls, they are dancing together "to the strains of the piano and violin. Tereza leaned her head on Tomas's shoulder. Just as she had when they flew together in the airplane through the storm clouds. She was experiencing the same odd happiness and odd sadness as then. The sadness meant: we are at the last station. The happiness meant: we are together [. . .] happiness filled the space of sadness" (313-14) and a butterfly, which is traditionally a symbol of hope and rebirth, circles the room. These are Tomas and Tereza's final moments together. For Tomas and Tereza, this sense of weightlessness is short lived but to contrast, the lives of Susanne and Ayten are made significant by their ability to forgive and to love despite the opposition they may face. Just as Akin's film opens with a festival and celebration, it closes with a mother and her daughter's lover reconciled, and a son awaiting his father's return from a fishing trip so that they can finally make their peace. The film's title suggests pursuing what is on the other side to escape the weight and oppression of what is on *this* side. The interweaving of life and death, and love and loss echoes the ever-present binaries of Kundera's novel. The characters in Akin's film realize that the only way to combat the oppressive forces of the world in which they live or to come to terms with life's tragedies and suffering is through love and forgiveness.

The first narrative, that of Yeter, is one of oppression; Yeter pursues lightness in order to combat the forces that keep her in a position of subjugation. Yeter's name, which literally means "enough" symbolizes her position as oppressed, yet the name she tells Ali when she first meets him is "Jessie." Changing her name speaks to her own desire to move "to the other side," or out of the position of the oppressed so that she can be "lighter than air" (Kundera 5). Yet, this image

is quickly shattered as Ali realizes that she is Turkish and “Jessie” is not her real name. One night, two Turkish men threaten Yeter on a train and tell her they know she is Turkish and a Moslem. They believe her occupation brings shame on both their country and their religion and they command that she repent. To worsen the threat, they imply that if they ever catch her at her “whore house” again, they will take drastic measures to silence her. With a virulent tone, one of the men exclaims, “You are both a Muslim and a Turk, do you understand me?”²⁶ It is at this moment that Yeter decides to accept Ali’s proposition of moving in with him and getting paid to be his companion. In order to convince her to do so, Ali promises that he will not make any “demands”²⁷ of her. His request seems innocent as he reveals that he simply wants her to live with and sleep in the same bed with him. Fearful of the Turkish men who threatened her, Yeter hastily moves in with Ali, though it is apparent that she does so not because she thinks it is a good offer but because she fears the Turkish men will harm her.

Instead of finding freedom in her life with Ali, Yeter is oppressed by Ali’s paranoia and distrust and by her despair that results from her separation from her daughter. One night at dinner, Yeter opens up about her private life, revealing to Nejat that she lost her husband in a shooting in Maras in 1978. She has struggled since then to provide for her daughter but sends her money to pay for her education. She believes she has no other option than to remain in Germany in order to provide an education for her Ayten, confident that it will provide her stability and a better life. Yeter confides in Nejat because she knows that he is a professor of German literature and therefore understands the value of education. She admits to him that she is ashamed that she works as a prostitute in order to acquire the money for Ayten’s education. As she sorrowfully recounts her story, she confesses that her daughter is unaware of her occupation and that she believes she works in a shoe shop. To perpetuate this idea, Yeter occasionally sends her shoes.

For Yeter, the stability that an education will provide Ayten is weight, but the pressure it puts on her is burdensome and to escape the burden of pressure, she seeks to make her life lighter. After Yeter has revealed her story to Nejat, he empathizes with her struggle. Ali, however, misconstrues Nejat's empathy and insinuates that he and Yeter will become lovers.

As Yeter leaves her occupation as a prostitute and enters Ali's world, she no longer has the option to pursue lightness but is instead afflicted by Ali's paranoid and violent behavior. Once Yeter realizes that her pursuit of lightness will only betray her, she turns to something that seems more constant—life with Ali. That is, her occupation as prostitute and her name “Jessie” allow her to pursue lightness through her persona; by concealing her identity and her name, she is able to escape the forces of fate that oppress her (such as her separation from Ayten and her identity as a Turkish immigrant and widow). Her act, however, betrays her once the two Turkish men discover her true identity; by answering Ali in Turkish, Yeter accidentally and carelessly makes it known that she is Turkish. Moving in with Ali promises a safe-haven and a more respectable life, but Ali ends up betraying her just as her pursuit of lightness does. The terrible irony is that she thinks her life with Ali will provide lightness, but does not. Ali mistakenly suspects that she and Nejat have become lovers and so he harasses the two until Yeter finally stands up to him and demands that he cease his obnoxious behavior. Yeter hopes that by being assertive, Ali will quiet down so that they can have a peaceful life together, but instead, his drunken violence prompts him to strike her and she hits her head on the corner of a bedframe in this tragic accident and dies.

Lotte, much like Yeter, is one who pursues lightness until she meets Ayten, realizing that helping her can give significance to both of their lives. Before Lotte and Ayten meet, Lotte has just travelled to India because she is a free spirit and does not want to be tied to anything. When

Lotte first meets Ayten, they have a good time together and go to clubs enjoying what appears to be a life without responsibility. Later, however, Ayten reveals that she has just fled Turkey for fear of political persecution and Lotte is quickly absorbed into Ayten's world and falls in love with her. She realizes that her life has been too carefree and that she wants to do something meaningful, so she petitions her mother to help Ayten get political asylum, which after a year's time, she is denied. A.O Scott sees Lotte as a naïve character, arguing that her, "mix of childish impulsiveness and half-baked idealism puts her at odds with her mother, Susanne, a former hippie whose accommodation to respectable middle-class life drives Lotte crazy. Lotte is immediately smitten with Ayten [. . .] It is not hard to see why. The prospect of helping a radical fugitive from an exotic country appeals to Lotte's sense of political drama." Scott does not give enough credit to Lotte for traveling to Turkey for a greater purpose—to help Ayten—not merely for political drama. Once Lotte arrives in Turkey, she needs money and calls her mother, Susanne for help. Their phone conversation ends with Susanne telling Lotte she must stop wasting her life and that she will no longer help her daughter—that she is finally and truly on her own. It is not until after Lotte's death that Susanne realizes the greater purpose for which Lotte was fighting and through this realization she understands that she must reconcile her relationship with Ayten. Through this reconciliation she discovers the weight her life was missing.

It is not until after Lotte's death that Susanne understands that Ayten believes she is fighting for a greater cause. When Ayten and Susanne first meet, Ayten tries to explain the political turmoil in Turkey, admitting that she had to flee the country because she would have been arrested for speaking out against the government and for engaging in rebel activities. Susanne misunderstands and accuses Ayten of wanting to fight for the sake of fighting. In attempting to clear up the misunderstanding, Ayten speaks of the Turkish citizens who have been

robbed of their free will. Susanne then reiterates what started the argument and tells her that maybe things will get better if Turkey joins the European Union. Ayten believes that by rebelling against Turkey's political oppression, she can make her own life significant but she can also enact the change that will allow for the younger generation to have better lives. One of the problems of the Turkish government, Ayten explains to Susanne, is that they do not understand the value of education. After this conversation, the relationship between Ayten and Susanne becomes strained and when Lotte calls her mother from Turkey asking for money, Susanne thinks that she is being irresponsible. She does not understand the political oppression against which Ayten tries to assert herself nor does she recognize that Lotte is also trying to fight against this oppression because she is in love with Ayten.

Following Lotte's death, Ayten and Susanne are able to reconcile their strained relationship. Once Susanne is in Turkey, she is able to stay where Lotte lived during her time in Turkey, and she reads her journal. In it, Lotte describes how her mother does not understand that Lotte's strength is what has led her to Turkey to help Ayten. She also explains that she finally has a purpose or something important to stand for and that Susanne should understand this because she was much like this when she was younger. It is after she has read Lotte's journal that she finally understands why she was helping Ayten. At this moment, Susanne decides that she too will help Ayten and that she will treat her as if she were her own daughter. When she goes to the prison where Ayten is being held, Ayten cries and begs forgiveness, but the only word she can manage to produce is "forgiven." As Ayten repeats this word, Susanne seems to realize that she, too, can be forgiven for refusing to help her daughter through her love and acceptance of Ayten. During this poignant moment, Susanne and Ayten both shed tears as they reconcile their relationship and promise to honor Lotte's memory by loving and helping each other. Susanne

tells Ayten that it is what Lotte wanted and that it is what she wants now, indicating her own transformation in which she formerly believed Lotte was being irresponsible but she now believes that helping Ayten will make both of their lives more significant and meaningful.

While Susanne's transformation is significant, Ali's son, Nejat experiences the most radical transformation. In the beginning, Nejat is hesitant to accept Yeter's occupation and he questions his father's relationship with her. Gradually, he comes to understand Yeter's plight, but he becomes estranged from his father when Ali is arrested and imprisoned because he is responsible for Yeter's death. Nejat moves to Turkey to try to find Ayten to assume responsibility for her education and to atone for his father's mistake. Nejat tries to connect with his father before Yeter becomes a part of their lives and suggests her read *Demircinin Kizi*, The story is about the suffering of a Turkish immigrant, and Nejat's desire for his father to read the book indicates that he empathizes with his father's feeling of displacement. Later when Nejat is in Turkey, a family friend informs him that his father has been released from his German prison and has returned to the Black Sea Coast, but Nejat refuses to see him for a long time. He bears the burden of his father's unintentional murder but he also bears the burden of his refusal to forgive him. Nejat's realization occurs during the feast of Bayram and he finally realizes the weight of his inability to forgive when Susanne asks him what the Bayram festival is celebrating. He tells her the story of Ebrahim and that God told him to sacrifice his son. Then he recalls that he was afraid of the story as a child and says that his father told him he would have made God his enemy to protect him. In this moment, Nejat realizes he must seek to make amends with his father. Just as Nejat realizes that only through forgiveness can he and his father be reconciled, the scene cuts to Ali who has just finished *Demircinin Kizi* and has tears in his eyes as he likely understands that Nejat was aware of and understood his feeling of displacement all along.

While the film ends with the idea that through forgiveness there is redemption and freedom, ultimately it is only through loss that this redemption can be achieved. In spite of everything, Nejat, Ayten, Susanne and presumably Ali are able to find the freedom that the characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are never able to achieve. It is true that Tomas and Tereza find freedom in the country—freedom from betrayal and from the political oppression of the city—but no sooner do they find that freedom then they lose their precious Karenin and are shortly thereafter killed in a car accident. These final moments in Kundera's novel convey the idea that the freedom they find is really only a façade, and that only in death are they freed from the burden of their love and from the unbearable lightness of being. In Akin's film, both weight and lightness can be desirable. As in Yeter's case, lightness can be considered positive as it allows her to rebel against the oppressive forces that seek to subjugate her. Lotte, on the other hand, realizes that her life needs weight—that is has been too light—and she finds this in helping Ayten who believes that she is fighting for a cause greater than herself.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Subverting Fate and Taking Back the Freedom of Autonomy

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera offers an existential framework that centers on the lives of his four fictional characters through whom we see his central concepts of lightness and weight. Sharing the premise of Nietzsche's myth of eternal return, Kundera's existentialism searches for a way to give significance to life. For Nietzsche, life has significance only when we choose to live affirmative and to embrace our fate. For Kundera, however, life lacks the weight of having been significant because it can never be repeated or retried and because once it vanishes, all moments of significance are extinguished along with it. To subvert this terrifying prospect, Kundera has imagined a framework in which life can be made significant simply because we choose lightness or weight and through our attempting to combat or subvert the external forces with which fate seeks to crush us.

While fate is largely a part of our lives and determines what kind of life we will live or whether we can give significance to it, for Kundera, it is not the only force of determination. Choice allows us to subvert the oppressive forces of our fate because we can opt for weight or lightness. Likewise, if fate gives weight to our lives as is illustrated in Tomas's "*es muss sein*," we can either embrace that fate or we can choose to pursue lightness instead. For Tomas, embracing his "*es muss sein*" allows him to escape the crushing force of his fate because he has made the decision that weight is where value lies and how life can be significant. Kundera posits that while fate often oppresses us with undesirable and sometimes even horrible circumstances, we can choose to combat that fate through our pursuit of weight or lightness. Fate does not dictate whether our lives will be meaningful; it simply provides a way for us to recognize whether weight or lightness will make our lives more significant. In this way, Kundera's

existentialism almost mirrors Nietzsche's myth because Nietzsche believes that having the crushing weight of eternal return looming heavily over our lives will make us choose either to live life more affirmatively or to accept the crushing fate and let it oppress us. While the outcomes of Nietzsche's philosophy and Kundera's position are different, they both center on the idea of living life in such a way as to subvert the crushing force of fate.

Because Kundera's novel centers on the lives of only four characters, his concepts have limited application. It is difficult to distinguish how these ideas are fully at work because we can only see how the four characters respond to lightness and weight. Furthermore, the four characters he has created are so similar that it is as if the novel only presents two character types: the strong and the weak. Both Tomas and Sabina are considered strong and both of them pursue lightness. Tomas, however, eventually decides that weight is more desirable because it will give more significance to his life. Franz and Tereza belong among the weak characters and they both pursue weight. Since the novel only examines these two character types, we cannot even begin to appreciate the complexities of Kundera's concepts and the many different ways in which people can respond to lightness and weight. It is especially difficult to discern how exactly these two concepts function within such a limited scope, because the relationships of the characters are not fully developed. It is as if the concepts are only hypothetical until we extract them from the novel and they become fully meaningful. In the very beginning of the novel, Kundera admits that it is difficult to tell whether lightness is positive and weight negative and this question hovers throughout the novel and remains ambiguous at the end. Using his framework to examine other works resolves most of the ambiguity and also allows for the creation of taxonomy of types of dealing with and responding to lightness and weight and how they function within all kinds of settings. Within the varying contexts, the characters who are portrayed have vastly different

social and economic backgrounds and lifestyles and Kundera's ideas can be applicable to their lives regardless of their position or upbringing.

Using Kundera's existentialism as a critical lens to examine the different ways of responding to lightness and weight is best applied to films that have multi-linear stories that present many different characters. *Mammoth* (2009), *The Hours* (2002), and *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven* (2007) all feature multi-linear narratives that intercut the stories of different characters from different social, ethnic and economic backgrounds. In *Mammoth*, weight is positive because that is where true value lies. For Gloria as well as for the Vidales family, weight can be found through their relationships with their families. In *The Hours*, however, some of the characters find the weight of family too burdensome and crushing. For Virginia and Laura, who are depicted in Daldry's film, meaning equals happiness but happiness is nearly unattainable because of the oppressive force of their fate. For them, weight is too crushing and lightness is a more desirable choice, even though both choices prove to be too burdensome for them in the end. In Akin's film, weight can be a positive choice when it results from the redemption that comes from forgiveness. The characters' experiences of dealing with lightness and weight are all different and thereby allow a better scope of the ways in which Kundera's existentialism functions. Furthermore, examining the characters through this lens also allows us to examine our own lives and could be a fresh way of understanding how to give significance to them.

NOTES

¹ Kundera explains, “Let us therefore agree that the idea of eternal return implies a perspective from which things appear other than as we know them: they appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature. This mitigating circumstance prevents us from coming to a verdict. For how can we condemn something that is ephemeral, in transit? In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine” (4). He believes that eternal return means that we have no choice and therefore it robs us of our autonomy. Likewise, it prevents us from recognizing what is desirable and what is not, because we lack autonomy and therefore cannot decide. We simply must accept what happens.

² In discussing Parmenides, Kundera notes that the ancient philosopher saw the world as a series of binaries: “He saw the world divided into pairs of opposites: light/darkness, fineness/coarseness, warmth/cold, being/non-being. One half of the opposition he called positive (light, fineness, warmth, being), the other negative. We might find this division into positive and negative poles childishly simple except for one difficulty: which one is positive, weight or lightness?” (5). While Kundera creates a series of binaries of his own such as lightness/weight, soul/body, strength/weakness, he does not agree with Parmenides about the designation of what is positive and what is negative. He concedes that it varies according to individual choice and experience and the terms positive and negative become meaningless as they are replaced by lightness and weight.

³ John Barnard equates lightness with the positive: “fineness, warmth, being, freedom” (66) and weight with the negative “cold, non-being, the burden of responsibility” (66) but Kundera admits that it is nearly impossible to assign lightness a positive value and weight a

negative one. Likewise, Kundera rejects Parmenides assumption that lightness is positive and is associated with “fineness, warmth, being, freedom.”

⁴ After Kundera has established that he rejects Nietzsche’s myth, he constantly questions which is better, lightness or weight? He asks how we will respond to these categories and how we will combat our fate.

⁵ In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asks a series of questions, including “how can we console ourselves” knowing that “God is dead [. . .] and we have killed him!” (120). The purpose of this questions is to acknowledge that we have no higher being telling us what choices to make or how to live our lives. This would be a terrifying prospect, but Nietzsche believes that choosing to live more affirmatively quells this fear.

⁶ Kundera exemplifies the ambiguity of his philosophical concepts in his reference to Parmenides, but later refers to Beethoven and claims that the composer views weight as something positive (33) whereas Parmenides views it as negative. In presenting differing ways of thinking of his concepts, he illustrates the complexity of them and the difficulty in assigning them absolute values (such as positive or negative).

⁷ Kundera rejects that any moments of our lives will be repeated, but he acknowledges that there are historical patterns in which horrific events, such as genocide, inevitably recur because human nature is inherently flawed. This is but one way Kundera complicates his own philosophical framework.

⁸ Tomas’s questions “*Muss es sein?*” translated as “must it be” later becomes his “*Es muss sein*” or “it must be,” transforming from a question into a way of life. “*Es könnte auch anders sein*” means “it could just as well be otherwise” and reflects Kundera’s notion that

moments that only occur once lose any meaning they might have incurred when that life disappears once and for all.

⁹ “Lightness and Weight” is the title of parts one and five, and “Soul and Body” the title of parts two and four.

¹⁰ “*Einmal ist keinmal,*” what happens once might as well not have happened at all (Kundera 8).

¹¹ They literally try to look past their bodies and see their souls by looking in the mirror but they also do this metaphorically.

¹² Because Kundera’s philosophy is so intricately tied to his characters and their actions, choices, and relationships, it cannot stand on its own like Nietzsche’s myth, which more generally can relate to humanity as a whole. Kundera’s concepts, however, are dependent upon fate as well as the choices the characters make.

¹³ The narrator later reflects that “Tomas pondered the catastrophic mistake he made by returning to Prague from Zurich. He kept his eyes trained on the road so as to avoid looking at Tereza. He was furious with her. Her presence at his side felt more unbearably fortuitous than ever” (226).

¹⁴ As Fred Misurella points out, in the novel, Kundera “puzzle[s] over life as his characters do; and he [does], like the reader, try to make sense of the complex personalities, actions, and fates of the characters he creates” (106). As the novel closes, Kundera concedes that some questions are unanswerable; likewise, we may not understand the complex nature of the people we encounter and the people we love, nor can we answer why fate often oppresses us

with difficult and painful circumstances. We can, however, choose the relationships we build and this autonomy allows us to transcend life's unanswerable questions.

¹⁵ Gloria's mother believes that providing a better life for her children is more important than being united with her family. Gloria, however, comes to realize that her children's lives cannot be "better" if she is absent from them.

¹⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* at oxford University Press

¹⁷ Leo's business partner explains that the mammoth's ivory was found in Siberia, frozen for many years, and it has to be processed and then set aside for five years before it can be polished and used. The long and tedious process by which the polished ivory is produced indicates that the ivory is precious, and while it is expensive, is priceless.

¹⁸ When presenting Leo with the pen, his associate tells him, "you're gonna need this," indicating he will need a pen to sign the contract, but ironically, Leo also needs the symbolic value of this particular pen to help him discover the value of weight.

¹⁹ By International Dateline

²⁰ Ellen Bassuk explains that many people supposedly benefited from this treatment but Virginia Woolf became sicker. While women who were treated with the rest cure often suffered a uteran or pelvic problem, Dr. Mitchell believed it to be a neurological problem resulting from the fatigue of their domestic lives.

²¹ When the aged Laura Brown comes to New York for her son's funeral, she admits to Clarissa that she felt the burden of family to be so unbearable that it left her with two choices: life or death. Choosing life, for Laura, meant leaving her family.

²² From Marilyn Charles's essay on *The Hours*

²³ Maria Němcová Banerjee

²⁴ Translations of the chapter titles are “Yeter’s Death,” “Lotte’s Death,” and “The Edge of Heaven.”

²⁵ David Gramling, author of “On the Other Side of Monolingualism: Fatih Akin’s Linguistic Turn (s).”

²⁶ Translated from the Turkish, “Sen hem Müslüman hem Türksün, anladın mı.” See citation for Gramling.

²⁷ Ali does not explicitly say that “demands” refers to sexual favors, although it is strongly implied.

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