

## 1. Narrative, information and actual-world/fictional world encyclopedias

Evidently, narratives, from their beginnings, have served as important tools for modelling the human world: if, for the moment, I omit the cognitive potential of narratives and stay at the level of pure information delivered by narrative genres, I can randomly suggest that ancient tragedies introduced the will of the Gods to their audiences, travelogues uncovered the unknown world before their reader's eyes, and realist novels taught their readers about contemporary social theories. In more recent times, narratives have served as mediators of information regarding human experience of distant cultures, religions and political regimes. In sum, narratives play many important *functions* in the world of humans.

The functional approach to literature teaches us that fictional narratives, although dominated by the poetic (or aesthetic) function, also display other functions – to various degrees, of course. The proclaimed domination of the poetic (aesthetic) function is the main argument for viewing literary artworks as specific, self-referential signs. Nevertheless, the self-referentiality of literary artworks does not mean that they cannot serve other functions, some of which are connected with their external reference. Indeed, among others, one of the most important 'side-functions' of literary artworks has been considered the referential function, as Roman Jakobson terms it:

The verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function. But even though a set (*Einstellung*) toward the referent, an orientation toward the CONTEXT – briefly, the so-called REFERENTIAL, "denotative," "cognitive" function – is the leading task of numerous messages, the accessory participation of the other functions in such messages must be taken into account by the observant linguist. (1960: 353)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The functional approach has been developed especially within the structuralist investigation of The Prague School since the 1920s. This approach represents the background of modern functional linguistics in the fields of general and functional stylistics in particular. The concept of functional linguistics is based on an assumption, borrowed from the general model of communication, that particular language statements represent specific messages from a sender to a receiver in the act of language communication. These messages are designed in order to carry specific meaning: "The sender in the act of speaking follows some aims/functions and according to the aims uses specific language devices, a specific functional language" (Starý 1995: 36). Consequently, the functional approach leads the Prague School scholars to two major fields of literary theoretical investigation:

In order to not to become embroiled in the complex issue of fictional reference, I shall call this function the *informational function* – a function that concerns information provided by fictional narratives through the description of real states of affairs. Nevertheless, this seems to be the furthest point we can reach with the functional approach: it is understandable that the relationship between the dominating poetic (aesthetic) function and the informational function in works of fiction is highly dynamic, since it is determined by many more or less variable factors such as the work's appurtenance to a particular genre, the context of its genesis and the context of its reception.

In light of these variables, instead of imposing general rules on the appearance and strength of the informational function in fictional narratives, which is an unachievable task, I shall rely on two theoretical concepts which, in my view, can help one to swim in this tricky current. I thus propose to employ the notions of *actual-world encyclopedia* and *fictional encyclopedia*, both developed and used within the realm of fictional worlds theory.

Fictional worlds theory borrows both of these *encyclopedias* from Umberto Eco, who has deployed the term *encyclopedia* repeatedly since the 1980s. In his *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994), Eco suggested that fictional worlds are “parasites” of the real world, and he called them “small worlds”: they are somehow based on the real world, but at the same time they are ontologically poorer. Eco does not rigidly differentiate between fictional and actual knowledge, considering both important sources of the (universal) *encyclopedia*, viewed as a general storage of communal knowledge regardless of the exact source of that knowledge: “the way we accept the representation of the actual world scarcely differs from the way we accept the representation of fictional worlds” (Eco 1994: 90). Nevertheless, the supremacy of the actual world over fictional worlds leads Eco to declare that “in fact, not only are authors supposed to take the actual world as the background of their story, but they constantly intervene to inform their readers about various aspects of the actual world they may not know.” (93)

As stated, fictional worlds theory borrows from Eco's encyclopedia and divides it into an *actual-world encyclopedia* and a *fictional encyclopedia*. Lubomír Doležel provides us with their definitions:

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the analysis of narrative models and situations (which are an important part of general narratological investigation) and the investigation of poetic language, bearing on the identity of literary artworks.

the actual-world encyclopedia is just one among numerous encyclopedias of possible worlds. Knowledge about a possible world constructed by a fictional text constitutes a fictional encyclopedia. Fictional encyclopedias are many and diverse, but all of them to a greater or lesser degree digress from the actual-world encyclopedia. [...] In fact, to orient themselves in the fictional world, to make valid inferences and to recover implicit meaning, the readers must include in their cognitive store the corresponding fictional encyclopedia. (Doležel 1998: 177–178)

However, it seems that at this point we are reaching the limits of fictional worlds theory with regards to our task: apart from the statement just quoted, namely that fictional encyclopedias “digress” from the actual-world encyclopedia, the general relationship between the actual-world encyclopedia and the fictional encyclopedia within fictional worlds theory remains relatively unelaborated. Not surprisingly, the influence of fictional encyclopedias on the actual-world encyclopedia has not been elaborated on at all. This state of affairs results from the fundamental precondition of fictional worlds theory which holds that between the actual world and fictional worlds there exists an impenetrable ontological barrier:

Possible-worlds semantics makes us aware that the material coming from the actual world has to undergo a substantial transformation at the world boundary. Because of the ontological sovereignty of fictional worlds, actual-world entities have to be converted into nonfactual possibles, with all the ontological, logical, and semantical consequences that this transformation entails. (Doležel 1998: 21)

The existence of this barrier significantly complicates our ability to describe the process of transformation of fictional information into actual information. As a result, there is no rule which would define the specific circumstances under which fictional information, forming part of the fictional encyclopedia, can become actual information, a part of the actual-world encyclopedia. However, I do believe that it is possible, at least in some particular cases, to describe the influence of fictional encyclopedias on human perception of the actual world by contributing to the latter’s encyclopedia. Nevertheless, the question is: how can we really detect and measure the impact of particular fictional encyclopedias on the actual-world encyclopedia? At this point, I wish to draw inspiration from Felix Vodička who, in his famous study (“Literární historie. Její problémy a úkoly” [Literary History: Its Problems and Tasks], 1942), claimed that in order to restore the literary aesthetic value of a particular period, it is necessary to analyse the critical echo of the literary artistic texts of that period. For the purpose of my work, this claim can be rephrased as follows: in order to realise the impact of a particular fictional encyclopedia on the actual-world encyclopedia, it is necessary to analyse the (critical) echo of the text which is the basis

of the fictional encyclopedia. Indeed, the reception of an artistic text, embodied in both reviews as well as in the readers' general reaction to the text, is the only source, although indirect, for examining the ways in which fictional encyclopedias intertwine with or replace the actual-world encyclopedia.

## 2. The reception of Milan Kundera's *The Joke*

With these considerations in mind, I now wish to focus on the situation during the late 1960s and early 1970s that emerged after the publication of Milan Kundera's famous novel *The Joke* (published as *Žert* in 1967 and subsequently in English translation in 1969). This novel attracted the attention of a great number of readers as well as that of reviewers and was generally regarded as highly successful. At the same time, however, it gave rise to a certain misunderstanding between the author and his readers, a misunderstanding which, as we shall see later, is ultimately not too difficult to explain. I shall also explain how this misunderstanding strongly influenced the relationship between the author and his audience in a somewhat negative way while at the same time forming this relationship by thematising it and bringing a pervasive dynamics and tension to the novel. Indeed, the history of *The Joke* and its echo seems to be a history of very specific moves, especially on the side of the author, who brilliantly adopts counter-positions in relation to commonly accepted opinion.<sup>1</sup>

In his foreword to the fourth English edition of the novel in 1982, Kundera describes a moment which occurred two years earlier at a panel discussion devoted to the novel: according to Kundera, someone had called *The Joke* a "major indictment of Stalinism." Kundera replied: "Spare me your Stalinism, please. *The Joke* is a love story" (vii). So is *The Joke* a political novel about the period of Stalinism in post-war Czechoslovakia, or is it a love story using this historical period in order to augment the "love-storiness" of the novel? To answer this question, one must focus on three different levels of the novel and its "life" in the literary communication process: a) the author's intention and ambition; b) the thematically and stylistically analysable features of the novel itself; and c) the circumstances of the novel's reception. This third level is firmly connected to the previously used terms of the actual-world and fictional encyclopedias: the circumstances of reception actually determine the possibility for the readers to replace a part of their actual-world encyclopedia with

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<sup>1</sup> It could be assumed that Milan Kundera in fact consistently re-models his real readers according to his idea of the ideal reader of his texts by all possible means: not only by the fictional narratives as such, but also by a vast number of paratexts such as forewords, afterwords, interviews and polemics. If Eco's notion of the *model reader* were not restricted to fictional narratives and their structures, it could be that Kundera actually attempts to turn real readers into the model readers of his work. From a different viewpoint, it might be suggested that the reception history of *The Joke* has been the history of a constant (aesthetic) struggle between the author and his readers.

the fictional one, as we shall see later.

Before proceeding further with an investigation of these levels, let me first provide a brief outline of the book's history. *The Joke* was first published in Czech in the former Czechoslovakia in 1967, reaching an astounding circulation of 170,000 copies between 1967 and 1969.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the book became a great success.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968, the content of the novel was deemed "vile" and "dangerous" – as Milan Kundera describes the situation in his foreword to the 1982 edition: "Immediately thereafter [the invasion], *The Joke* [...] was banned, removed from public libraries, erased from the history of Czech literature" (Kundera 1982: ix). The popularity of the novel as well as its ban and removal from the shelves of Czechoslovak bookstores and libraries could hardly have resulted from the fact that *The Joke* was interpreted as a pure love story: no authorities in Europe during the late 1960s were afraid of love stories, for they pose no threat to regimes, totalitarian or otherwise. Evidently, *The Joke* was being read politically in former Czechoslovakia.

The first translation of *The Joke* into English appeared in 1969,<sup>3</sup> both in England and in the United States. Immediately after its release, the author expressed deep concerns about the "correctness" of the final form of the work. Kundera in particular protested against the fact that the publishers deliberately brought the book closer to a purely political reading and interpretation, mainly (according to the author) due to crucial changes to the general layout of the novel.<sup>4</sup> This situation triggered a heated discussion between the highly displeased author and the publishers, who tried to justify the changes to the novel. The author complained of "double politicisation," which he described as follows:

*Habent sua fata libelli.* Books have their fates. The fate of the book called *The Joke* coincided with a time when the combined inanity of ideological dictatorship (in the Communist countries) and journalistic oversimplification (in the West) was able to

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the population of Czechoslovakia of the late 1960s was just over 9 million.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Kundera describes in one of his paratexts how the publisher hesitated for two years before finally agreeing to publish the book. The publisher was not convinced that publishing the book in the particular political situation of Czechoslovakia during the late 1960s was a good idea. What the editor was afraid of was not the readers' reception of the book, but rather refusal by the authorities to publish it.

<sup>3</sup> *The Joke* was published in two different editions, one in the United Kingdom and the other in the United States, both in 1969.

<sup>4</sup> The author published his concerns about the UK version of *The Joke* in the *Times Literary Supplement*. The translation removed some episodes of the novel and changed the particular layout of the novel's chapters. Kundera's dissatisfaction resulted in a new, recast version of the novel in 1982 which was, in terms of its parts and general layout, identical to the original. However, this time the author was not satisfied with the style of the revised translation.

prevent a work of art from telling its own truth in its own words. The ideologues in Prague took *The Joke* for a pamphlet against socialism and banned it; the foreign Publisher took it for a political fantasy that became reality for a few weeks and rewrote it accordingly. (Kundera 1982: xii)

So what is so special about *The Joke* that, contrary to Kundera's wishes, causes it to be interpreted in these ways? What kind of chemistry seduces its readers, publishers<sup>1</sup> and the authorities to adopt a purely political reading, clearly against the proclaimed intention of the author? I believe that it is not too difficult to see that *The Joke* displays a considerable potential to deliver a highly political and in-actual-world-anchored message during the act of its reception. First of all, the historical and political map of the world of *The Joke* closely correlates with the political and historical map of the actual world: many of the fictional events are fictional counterparts of actual-world events acted out by fictional counterparts of actual-world people and that occur in fictional counterparts of actual-world places. In other words, the events, people and places described are shared by the fictional and actual-world encyclopedias. This results in a strong *effect of reality*.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, *The Joke* combines narrative strategies typical of classical realist novels with those employed by the reportage genre and with essayistic passages which analyse the actual world's historical and political situation, i.e. those means which, in combination, enhance the *effect of reality* in fictional texts: "Critics have called it a realistic novel because of the way it exemplifies the conditions of Czechoslovak society in the two first decades of the Communist regime" (Němcová-Banerjee 1990: 11). In sum, a unique combination of formal narrative devices and clear reference to the actual world result in specific information used for the plausible construction of a possible actual world. Nevertheless, the third and final aspect supporting a political reading of *The Joke* lies in the specific historical and political situation at the time of its reception. The specificity of the situation consists in the ways in which totalitarian regimes would deal with information about their practices, the ways in which they falsify history and the ways in which they make adjustments to the present. Undoubtedly, the period of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia substantially increased the number of gaps in information about the actual world behind the Iron Curtain. For example, the regime

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<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that the readers and the publishers of *The Joke* approached the novel from similar positions and that the novel's reception is a product of joint moves: the reader's will to read the novel politically and the publisher's attempt to situate the novel in the language and cultural context of the target public.

<sup>2</sup> Here I deliberately use the term *effect of reality* in order to avoid any confusion with Roland Barthes' ([1968] 1986) term "the reality effect" (*effet de réel*) introduced in his famous essay. Whereas Barthes connected this term to the notion of the *referential illusion* which he firmly attached to the reference of a literary sign ("the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism"; 148), I use the term "effect of reality" to refer to the overlap between fictional and real-world encyclopedias.

did not want to share any information about its corruption such as political trials, prisoners and executions, the atmosphere of fear and the overall corruption of democratic values.

At this point I wish to draw attention to an important fact which strongly divides the reception of *The Joke* in Czechoslovakia from its reception in the Anglophone world. In this respect, we shall see that the time and place of reception of *The Joke* strongly influences the book's potential with regards to its informational function. We can see this in a passage from the book itself:

And so I was very glad when September came at last, bringing classes and (several days before classes began) my work at the Students Union, where I had an office to myself and all kinds of things to keep me busy. The day after I got back, however, I received a phone call summoning me to the District Party Secretariat. From that moment I remember everything in perfect detail. It was a sunny day, and as I came out of the Students Union building I felt the grief that had plagued me all summer slowly dissipating. I set off with an agreeable feeling of curiosity. I rang the bell and was let in by the chairman of the Party University Committee, a tall thin-faced youth with fair hair and ice-blue eyes. I gave him the standard greeting, "Honor to Labor," but instead of responding he said, "Go straight back. They're waiting for you." In the last room of the Secretariat, three members of the committee awaited me. They told me to sit down. I did, and understood that this was out of the ordinary. These three Comrades, whom I knew well and had always bantered with, wore severe expressions.

Their first question was whether I knew Marketa. I said I did. They asked me whether I had corresponded with her. I said I had. They asked me whether I remembered what I wrote. I said I did not, but immediately the postcard with the provocative text materialized before my eyes and I began to have an inkling of what was going on [...]

And you, what do you think of optimism? they asked. Optimism? I asked. What should I think of it? Do you consider yourself an optimist? they went on. I do, I said timidly. I like a good time, a good laugh, I said, trying to lighten the tone of the interrogation. Even a nihilist can like a good laugh, said one of them. He can laugh at people who suffer. A cynic also can like a good laugh, he went on. Do you think socialism can be built without optimism? asked another of them. No, I said. Then you're opposed to our building socialism, said the third. What do you mean? I protested. Because you think optimism is the opium of the people, they said, pressing their attack. The opium of the people? I protested again. Don't try to dodge the issue. That's what you wrote. Marx called religion the opium of the people, and you think our optimism is opium! That's what you wrote to Marketa. I wonder what

our workers, our shock workers, would say if they were to learn that the optimism spurring them on to overfulfill the plan was opium, another added. And the third: For a Trotskyite the optimism that builds socialism can never be more than opium. And you are a Trotskyite.

For heaven's sake, whatever gave you that idea? I protested. Did you write it or did you not? I may have written something of the kind as a joke, but that was two months ago, I don't remember. We'll be glad to refresh your memory, they said, and read me my postcard aloud: Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik. The words sounded so terrifying in the small Party Secretariat office that they frightened me and I felt they had a destructive force I was powerless to counter. (Kundera 1982: 36–37)

It can be assumed that in 1967 Czechoslovak readers of this passage must have found this particular quotation fully realistic, given the years in which the documents of the practices of the Communist regime during the period of Stalinism were suppressed. The only information about such practices was unofficial and came from those who were actually oppressed by the regime, so that information of this type was very limited. Nevertheless, the recently opened archives finally have proved these facts to be true, both in content and in form. This fictional interrogation overlaps not only with what might have happened but, more likely, with what very probably did happen many times during that period. In 1967 this information clearly referred to Stalinist Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, the situation for Anglophone readers at the time of the release of the English translation of *The Joke*, i.e. in 1969, was completely different.

The period of liberalisation in the late 1960s concluded with an act of severe aggression: the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies, an act which actually “promised” a new era of corruption and new gaps in history. Moreover, the release of *The Joke* coincided with such a situation, as Hana Nemcova-Banerjee describes it: “There is a tendency in the West to interpret *The Joke* in light of the events of August 1968. After all, the novel burst upon the consciousness of European readers just as images of tanks on the streets of Prague were vanishing from their television screens. But the association of the two is misleading, like an optical illusion” (1990: 74–75). All the above-mentioned realistic features of *The Joke* and the historical circumstances of its reception thus made its readers merge the actual-world encyclopedia and the fictional encyclopedia of the novel and use them both to interpret the novel so as to understand what was happening in the actual world. And it is, indeed, a matter of fact that many of the readers and reviewers directly related *The Joke* (finished in 1965) to the Czechoslovakia of 1968, probably considering the Communist oppression there as invariable. A prime example of this confusion is the



discussion which appeared in *The New York Review of Books* in 1970.<sup>1</sup> This discussion, originally focused on the relevance of the publisher's work with the first American edition of *The Joke*, consequently turned into evaluating the potential of *The Joke* to refer to the political situation of contemporary Czechoslovakia. In the heat of the ensuing discussion, Erazim V. Kohák, a prominent Czech *émigré*, published a contribution in which he pontificates about some of the contributors to this discussion who confused the period of Stalinism in former Czechoslovakia (to which *The Joke* actually refers) with the period of Dubček's liberation and its violent termination by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies (during which *The Joke* was published in English). It can be observed that Kohák, when discussing these topics, actually accedes to a large extent to a purely political reading of the novel. However, whereas confusing the events described in the novel with the Prague Spring 1968 was not acceptable to Kundera, nor to some of the reviewers who considered these two sets of events to be parallel, this seemed to be an important tool for the promotion of the book to the foreign public. At one point, the author himself "allows" his close friend, Louis Aragon, to draw a parallel between the two sets of events in his foreword to the 1968 French edition of *The Joke*, commenting on this foreword as follows: "Aragon wrote what is probably the most eloquent and penetrating piece anyone has written on the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia: his foreword to *The Joke*." (Kundera 1982: ix). In this case in particular, it would be fair to ask whether, for example, this paratext may (or may not) have contributed to the political reading of the novel (so vigorously objected to by the author) and if so, to what extent. It might also be wondered whether Kundera's attitude to the politicisation (or purely political reading) of his first novel has been consistent at all the levels at which he approached his readers.

Regarding these questions, it must be borne in mind that many of the contemporary commentaries on *The Joke* did not insist on a purely mimetic reading and that they viewed its political world as the background for an analysis of the existential dimension of the characters in a very specific and unfortunate political situation. It must be emphasized that Kundera himself has repeatedly advocated a reading of *The Joke* in which a mimetic representation of the Czechoslovak political situation should not play the main role. The author expressed this wish explicitly in his foreword of 1982 in which he draws a parallel between history and private lives:

But if a character is condemned to triviality in his private life, can he escape to the stage of history? No, I have always been convinced that the paradoxes of history and private life have the same basic properties. (Kundera 1982: viii)

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer especially to the exchange of views and ideas between D.A.N. Jones (1970), Oliver Stallybrass (1970) and Erazim Kohák (1970).

In his foreword to another edition of *The Joke*, in 2008, the author is explicit about his interest in existential themes which can be magnified by the historical situation:

the historical situation is not the very topic of the novel – its meaning lies in the fact that it throws new, extremely bright light on the existential topics which fascinate me: revenge, oblivion, reputation and disrepute, the relationship of history and man, alienation of one's own deeds, the split between sex and love, etc. (Kundera 2008: 36)

Clearly, *The Joke* expresses a strong potential for being read in a way which focuses on the characters who are “examined” under a specific political situation as objects of some kind of a social experiment in which the political situation described plays an important role. In this respect Kundera himself speaks about a man caught up in “the trap the world has become.”<sup>1</sup> This principle can be easily extended to (almost) all of Kundera's work.

Nevertheless, it is possible to say that most of the interpretations of Kundera's novels, and especially those of *The Joke*, are not purely political and do not focus only on the existential dimension of characters living under oppressive regimes: rather, they draw from both views, considering the political and existential dimensions inseparable. Indeed, the majority of the more recent interpretations of Kundera's works (interpretations outside the periods in which TV screens show tanks on the streets of Prague) are based on a similarly existential perspective: “Nearly all of Mr. Kundera's work is animated by a concern with politics – that is, politics as manifested in the ironic, even absurd, conditions of life in a totalitarian regime” (Howe 1982).

It seems that such interpretations not only correspond to the author's confessed intentions but that they also support the more general suggestion concerning the historical aspects of the actual-world encyclopedia:

Cultures and periods enjoying a stable world view will tend to seek minimal incompleteness by adopting various strategies [...] By contrast, periods of transition and conflict tend to maximize the incompleteness of fictional worlds, which supposedly mirror corresponding features outside fiction. (Pavel 1986: 108–109).

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<sup>1</sup> Going even further, some critics followed the “character trace” so strictly that they were able to focus primarily on *The Joke's* characters and evaluate their qualities as if they were really living in our actual world: “Ludvik would be a loser anywhere, because he is simply uninteresting: a self-pitying, self-dramatizing and unimaginative man, bitter for as many wrong reasons as right ones. His personality infects *The Joke* and gives its style a heavy, pedestrian quality” (Broyard 1982).

If we extend Thomas Pavel's penetrating observation regarding the short period of liberalization in former Czechoslovakia, it can be argued that in those relatively stable historical periods which suffer from a lack of political information about the previous periods, fictional texts tend to be used as sources of information about the actual world. Consequently, this historical period was sufficient in terms of the supply/demand relation, and the political information available in fictional encyclopedias did not contribute to filling gaps in the actual-world encyclopedia with regard to the period itself.<sup>1</sup>

From all that has been said up to this point, it is obvious that Kundera spent a great deal of energy in attempting to convince his audience that *The Joke* possesses the ability to deliver a general message about various aspects of human existence and that the novel should not be reduced to the pure political testimony of a particular part of actual-world political history, even though history itself plays an important role as background. "One sympathizes with Mr. Kundera's evident wish not to be type-cast as a 'dissident' or 'political' novelist, but the truth is that, even as his books tell love stories and offer meditations on folk culture, they are saturated with politics" (Howe 1982). In conclusion, we may agree that the author's intention was to conduct a somewhat futile battle with the overall general realist form of the novel, and especially with the very specific political circumstances of its reception.

This can be considered the end of this particular story and one can only express the belief that both the author and his audience have learned their lesson. But if this is the case, why would an author who once displayed a strong dissatisfaction with a purely political reading of his book, and spent years fighting against the misinterpretation of the events described with the actual invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, write and publish a novel called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), which actually describes the events of the invasion, a novel that contains parts constructed as a highly plausible reportage of the invasion and elements of whose realism actually exceed those of *The Joke*? One example of this strong realist trace in the novel will suffice:

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<sup>1</sup> Here I would like to draw attention to the connections between Kundera's *The Joke* and George Orwell's *1984* (1949), referred to at the very beginning of this article. Both novels, describing wide contexts of topics from the political to the privately human, offer the possibility of being read in completely incongruent ways. Nevertheless, both novels continue to be widely read and interpreted. It is a matter of interest that one of the reviewers of Kundera's *The Joke* views the connection between the two novels also on another level. Anatole Broyard, who definitely does not belong to the large group of admirers of *The Joke*, compares Kundera's style to Orwell's famous topos: "As far as I'm concerned, at least in this book, Mr. Kundera, who is generally highly praised, is not writing well. His language seems to be somewhere between George Orwell's Newspeak and the querulousness of certain kinds of narcissistic fiction. And there isn't an interesting or convincing character in the book." (Broyard 1982)

Jan Prochazka, a forty-year-old Czech novelist with the strength and vitality of an ox, began criticising public affairs vociferously even before 1968. He then became one of the best-loved figures of the Prague Spring, that dizzying liberalization of Communism which ended with the Russian invasion. Shortly after the invasion the press initiated a smear campaign against him, but the more they smeared, the more people liked him. Then (in 1970, to be exact) the Czech radio broadcast a series of private talks between Prochazka and a professor friend of his which had taken place two years before (that is, in the spring of 1968). For a long time, neither of them had any idea that the professor's flat was bugged and their every step dogged. Prochazka loved to regale his friends with hyperbole and excess. Now his excess had become a weekly radio series. The secret police, who produced and directed the show, took pains to emphasize the sequences in which Prochazka made fun of his friends – Dubcek, for instance. People slander their friends at the drop of a hat, but they were more shocked by the much-loved Prochazka than by the much-hated secret police. (Kundera 1987: 133)

As can be seen, this part not only refers to actual living protagonists and leaders of the Prague Spring of 1968, but it also more or less accurately describes the exact events of that period witnessed by the citizens of Czechoslovakia. In addition, other parts of the novel express the strong effect of reality based both on the reference to the actual world as well as on the devices and techniques used in narration. In contrast to the above quoted passage from *The Joke* which was structured as a subjective description of the very probable interrogation of a young Communist by his Comrades, the passage taken from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* shows an objective narrator describing a real political situation which is part of the actual-world encyclopedia and therefore does not have to be replaced by the fictional one. There is no need to emphasize that, in the case of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the political situation of the time of the book's reception was similar for all readers, due quite simply to the fact that the beginning of the 1980s, when the book was published, was not accompanied by any important political events that were likely to determine the book's reception. Therefore, it seems that the conditions of the reception of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, unlike those of *The Joke*, together with the fictional world itself described in the novel did not support its potential to replace substantial parts of the actual-world encyclopedia by the fictional encyclopedia.

And finally, let us come back to the specific relationship between Milan Kundera and his readers, a relationship I characterised as a misunderstanding at the beginning of my study. In the case of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, it can be argued more strongly than anywhere else that this misunderstanding is actually an inevitable part

of the author's general aesthetic program. Again, this is a result of the author's attempt to model the author/reader relationship in every possible way, sometimes to the extent that the author actually undermines the reader's competence to read and interpret fictional texts and also their competence to understand the political world in which they live. Only then can the final aesthetic effect be achieved, based on a constant tension and fed by all the discussions involved: "Playfully mixing history with philosophy and fantasy, Mr. Kundera creates a world in which routine expectations are undercut, ideas and reason mocked" (Howe 1982). In the diction of fictional words theory, by using specific realist means and historical/political contexts, Milan Kundera not only constantly replaces the real world encyclopedia with the fictional encyclopedia, but he also constantly models his fictional encyclopedias by telling the readers how to read his fictional texts properly. This strategy actually shows that the relationships between the real world encyclopedia and the fictional encyclopedia have to be viewed at multiple levels and examined and described with multiple sets of tools.

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