

Milan Kundera and crowds again

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. Influenced by Martha Kuhlman, I am disposed to read Milan Kundera as personally disliking crowds. But I speculate that there is a practical reason for his writing against crowds, if we see him as part of a system of novelists.

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—It was when they stopped being loud

That I knew the badness of this crowd

The critic Martha Kuhlman observes how Milan Kundera repeatedly depicts crowds in a negative light, proposing that the novelist need not perceive them in this way. Here is a quotation she uses, from his popular novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

She would have liked to tell him that behind Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil and the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in union. (Kundera, quoted in Kuhlman 2001: 89)

I find that Kundera does often portray crowds in a negative light, though he differs on the details from novel to novel sometimes to the point of blatant inconsistency (Edward 2022). Anyway, it is difficult to avoid the impression that he just does not like crowds. I cannot shake that impression but I can at least envisage a situation in which we should dissociate Kundera the person from the anti-crowd sentiments of his novels and it seems worth sharing the envisaged

scenario.

Let us suppose that an author, call her Madam Gallimard, writes a novel which to most readers gives the impression of the following qualities:

- (A) It is written as if it could be just about anywhere. If you took out location names, you would not know where it is set.
- (B) The sentences are nice and clear – it is a clean style.
- (C) It is well structured.
- (D) There is a crowd in it who do bad things.

Regarding (D), the crowd specifically engages in rapes of the main character, but Madam Gallimard encourages readers to enjoy these. The novel is a cult success, but does not go mainstream.

Madam Gallimard then telephones Milan Kundera. She says, “Why was this novel not embraced by the mainstream? It is clearly written, it is well-structured, it is universal in style. Can you write a novel like this and change something so that it goes mainstream? I will publish your attempt.”

Kundera writes a novel with qualities (A) to (D) but stops encouraging readers to enjoy the bad things done by the crowd. I suppose many ambitious novelists in the same position would do that, or try to, whether personally having a distaste for crowds or not. Merely writing a good novel would not guarantee anything; for much success one has to meet other demands and the demand in this case comes from an influential author, and also publisher. A lot of the groundwork was laid by Madam Gallimard and this is the easiest and most obvious change. But perhaps this scenario I have envisaged is no more attractive than being cast as an author genuinely, repeatedly but inconsistently opposed to crowds.

References

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