

# Horățiu Tohătan

## **Nihilistic Network: Musil, Kundera and Houellebecq**

---

**Abstract:** This paper aims to create a semantic network that analyzes the evolution of nihilistic thought through three epochs of literary practice: modernism, postmodernism and contemporaneity. Following this, I propose that such a network can be constructed diachronically through the works of Robert Musil, Milan Kundera and Michael Houellebecq. Tackling subjects such as imperialism, migration, dictatorship, transnationality, I argue that the roots of their epistemological ethos lie predominantly in a nihilistic philosophy, a common core for these three authors. Therefore, starting from Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, this paper will analyse how Nietzschean nihilism and the ontological crisis is reflected in his novel. Consequently, through Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I shall argue that his postmodern nihilistic view can be articulated through Matei Călinescu's concept of *epistemological nihilism*. Finally, trying to expose the *zeitgeist* of contemporaneity, I shall explain how Houellebecq's perspective towards the individual-society duality in *Submission* can be expressed in relation with Jean Baudrillard concept of *transparent nihilism*.

**Keywords:** Semantic Network; Nihilism; Epistemological Nihilism; Transparent Nihilism; Antimodernism.

### **HORĂȚIU TOHĂȚAN**

Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
horatiu.tohatan@gmail.com

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2024.47.21

The numerous ways in which modernism was defined and conceptualized represents the sum of mentality grids, of comparative methodologies that try to explain an epoch, an artistically or cultural current or a worldview (*Weltanschauung*). In spite of the ideatic category of these interpretational grids – like phenomenology, materialism, post colonialism, feminism, queer-studies etc. – they represent meganarrations that gain their own cultural heritage, that pretend to explain a specific current of thought, with all their mental mutations across history.

Accepting the premise according to which not all interpretational methodologies can totalize their vision upon an epoch, recognizing, therefore, its limitations and framings, the present paper aims to propose a diachronically mapping of nihilistic philosophy in modernism, postmodernism and contemporaneity. A semantic network that follows the mutation of nihilism in literature can expose three different *Weltanschauungen*, that compose a common history and offer the *ethos* of three epochs of literary practice. In this sense, the methodological approach employed in the present paper is regarded as *distant theory*, as defined by Corin Braga:

... a distanced position by these systems, an approach that accepts the fact that they are not a correct and viable explication of the external and internal reality, but a totalizing narration elaborated by theologians, philosophers, anthropologists in order to understand the physical nature and the human mind.<sup>1</sup>

Starting from here, I will adopt the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche as the origin of the modernist mentality. A Nietzschean meganarration could explain both the early twentieth century worldview and its evolution in postmodernity and contemporaneity. Three volumes belonging to the aforementioned epochs could exemplify this nihilistic network: Robert Musil's novel, *The Man Without Qualities*,<sup>2</sup> Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*,<sup>3</sup> and Michael Houellebecq's *Submission*.<sup>4</sup> These three texts, viewed through nihilistic lens, outline a vision of the world marked by a pessimistic heaviness and a culture of resentment.<sup>5</sup> What I will try to argue is that, while the *fin-de-siècle* musilian modernism is based upon the philosophy of Nietzsche, the prevailing epistemo-ontological perspective of the universe in Milan Kundera's view is characterized by an epistemological nihilism, as defined by Matei Călinescu. Finally, my last argument is that such a semantic network can be encapsulated by the attitude of the protagonist from *Submission*, which can be summarized from the perspective of Jean Baudrillard's concept of "transparent nihilism".

### Ulrich: The Curious Embrace of Nihilism and Mysticism

In *Testaments Betrayed*, Milan Kundera engages in an intertextual exploration of the works of Nietzsche and Musil:

As Nietzsche brought philosophy closer to the novel, so Musil brought the novel toward philosophy. [...] Musil's *thinking novel* too brought about an unprecedented broadening of theme; nothing that can be thought about is henceforth excluded from the art of the novel.<sup>6</sup>

Through his unfinished project, Robert Musil succeeds in creating both a nihilistic macrocosm and microcosm, aiming to develop the polemics started by Nietzsche. In this sense, defining the "man without qualities" will aid in understanding the nihilistic dimension of Musil's *Weltanschauung*.

Ulrich, the protagonist of the novel, is a man who left behind all the great narrations that governed the social sphere in which he finds himself. Standing on the temporal threshold between the old Viennese society – the *Biedermeier* generation – and the modern, utopian future – The Parallel Action – the man without qualities is placed in a state of scepticism and uncertainty regarding his own history, as well as the promises of the future. The best definition is offered by Walter, Ulrich's friend, when he describes the protagonist to Clarrisa: "He is gifted, strong-willed, open-minded, fearless, tenacious, dashing, circumspect—why quibble, suppose we grant him all those qualities—yet he has none of them!"<sup>7</sup> Ulrich is built by the

author as a representation of the nihilistic idea according to which there is no human essence.

Musil starts from some of Nietzsche's ideas, as well as Ernst Mach's<sup>8</sup>, and focuses on the idea according to which there is no individual interiority. The man without qualities, in Aristotelian terms, is, therefore, the man who negates any form of actualization of potentialities. Through this act, he remains open to any form of becoming, refusing to be encapsulated in a classical professional pattern. Ulrich, despite having proven that he could make a career out of numerous professions, rejects them all and refuses to give himself in. Ulrich intentionally misses his becoming, the actualization of potentialities. Nevertheless, the failure of becoming represents a process of identity progress for the man without qualities.

The point however is that it is just this failure to be a mathematician, a soldier or an engineer that can be seen as a condition for self-development; he realizes that to construct one's identity through universal values and beliefs – which might well have lost their validity – or to behave according to the more circumscribed ethical codes of particular professions, makes people indifferent to their potentialities.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, the project of the man without qualities has a nihilistic foundation. While Nietzsche argued for the prevalence of becoming instead of being, with a perspective on temporality understood as an eternal recurrence, Musil argues for the dissolution of the subject and the necessity to recognize all potentialities from the nihilistic position of losing the

sufficient reason (God). Contemplating the houses that surrounded him, after having walked his partner Bonadea home, Ulrich comes to find a certain transcendental abandonment:

...it all seems at times as stiff as folding screens, as hard as a printer's die stamp, complete—there is no other way of putting it—so complete and finished that one is mere superfluous mist beside it, a small, exhaled breath God has no time for anymore.<sup>10</sup>

In line with this sense of loneliness, Musil derives from the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason to Ulrich's experimental principle of insufficient cause. Without an all-encompassing cause that moves every individual, the principle of insufficient cause represents the actualization of a *Weltanschauung* in which there are no laws that govern life. A brief explanation of this concept can be found in a dialogue between Ulrich and the banker Leo Fischel, when discussing the idea of progress and the idea of patriotism:

The Principle of Insufficient Cause, Ulrich elucidated. You are a philosopher yourself and know about the Principle of Sufficient Cause. The only exception we make is in our own individual cases: in our real, I mean our personal, lives, and in our public-historical lives, everything that happens for no good or sufficient reason.<sup>11</sup>

Once this principle is acknowledged, a certain sense of randomness is awakened. Talay-Turner observes how the idea of randomness is necessary for the idea of probability to

function on an ontological level. Moreover, a macrocosm ruled by chaos has its response in the microcosm of the individual: “the acceptance of a world governed by probability is the acceptance of a world in which the individual’s biography is governed, in principle, by pure chance”<sup>12</sup>. Following this stream of thought, Ulrich makes a distinction between persons who become *something*, a very specific identity, and the entities that, by refusing any form of individual becoming, become men without qualities.

After Ulrich is abandoned, he finds himself wandering aimlessly, as a fog. He thus wishes to become this man without qualities. He follows this train of thought and thinks of the experience of an average life. He concludes that, eventually, many people come too late to realize what had become of them and that everything had happened by pure chance: “It might even be fair to say that they were tricked, since nowhere is a sufficient reason to be found why everything should have turned out the way it did; it could just as well have turned out differently”<sup>13</sup>. This dichotomy between the “one that becomes something” and the “one that is aware of the multiplicity of the becomings” encompasses the essential difference between *sense of reality* and *sense of possibility*. While the sense of reality needs the possession of qualities, the sense of possibility represents “the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.”<sup>14</sup> Philip Payne observed that “the intensity of Ulrich’s awareness of others increases his sense of being separate from them”<sup>15</sup>. On this note, we could argue that this *awareness of others* (almost a Sartrean nausea) is the main effect of this sense of possibility.

With this hyper-awareness of reality, the outer world reveals its purely formal character, emphasizing the spectacular dimension of existence. As an example, during the protests scene, Ulrich sees the crowds gathered in front of count Leinsdorf’s mansion as a staged performance: “They did not really want to attack or rip anyone apart, although they looked as if they did”<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, through this confrontation between individual and crowd, a new way of understanding and grasping the human interiority opens to Ulrich. Sitting in the balcony, the protagonist feels how his *scene* is blending with the *scene* of the crowd, so that he can become a part of the masses. Through an exercise of decorporalization, Ulrich captures the pulse of the crowd while maintaining his own uniqueness of being without qualities:

It was an experience beyond his understanding; he was chiefly aware of the glassiness, emptiness, tranquillity of the state in which he found himself. Is it really possible, he wondered, to leave one’s own space for some hidden other space? He felt as though chance had led him through a secret door.<sup>17</sup>

The man without qualities succeeds in grasping reality from a secondary position, a position through which he escapes reality in order to question it from a distance. As Talay Turner observes, in this state of rupture, the ontological basis of Musil’s philosophy breaks away from the nihilistic perspective. In Nietzsche’s case, the dissolution of subject and of human essence is achieved by understanding life as a flux of actualizations<sup>18</sup>. For Musil, the process of becoming *without qualities* is carried out

through escapism, by accepting the potentiality-in-itself<sup>19</sup> as unique condition to question life.

Consequently, Musil's project to capture the epistemological dominant of the beginning of the twentieth century is built upon an apparent disengagement from life. In fact, the rejection of factual reality represents for Ulrich the means by which the nihilistic concept of *trying morality*<sup>20</sup> is exemplified. Nietzsche's view reflects the same interrogation of morality, more widely, in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "aren't we allowed to be a bit ironic with the subject, as we are with the predicate and object? Shouldn't philosophers rise above the belief in grammar? With all due respect to governesses, isn't it about time philosophy renounced governess-beliefs."<sup>21</sup> Ulrich is the one who, endowed with full potential, undertakes an experimental project that allows him to adopt a sceptical attitude towards the morals of the past generations and towards the projects of the so-called utopian future. From the position of the man without qualities, out of this *sense of reality*, Ulrich takes on a messianic role in order to build a moral guide that will govern in the twentieth century<sup>22</sup>.

As a follower of a modernist philosophy – as defined by Matei Călinescu when discussing Baudelaire<sup>23</sup> – Robert Musil, alongside Ulrich, adopts the present temporality as a unique way of solving the dialectics between past and future. These two temporalities concatenate in the present in order to allow potentiality and becoming to take place. "In the spirit of Nietzsche, Musil attempt to redeem the past for the sake of the present, and he also attempts to create our own futures"<sup>24</sup>. This vitalism of the present moment clearly highlights the

heroic and, naturally, the messianic dimension of the man without qualities.

While the individual messianic figure of Ulrich adopts a project of remaining without qualities, a second type of messianism is taking place on a political level. I am referring to the Parallel Action, i.e., a movement meant to totalize the imperialistic dream of the Habsburg Empire. Planning to celebrate Franz Joseph's seventieth year of ruling, characters such as Arnheim, Leinsdorf and Diotima organize the Kafkaesque project of the Parallel Action. Following the linear perspective of time from the Judeo-Christian tradition, the turn of the century comes with the promise of a Utopia. The logic of expectation<sup>25</sup> is constructed in *The Man without Qualities* though this imperialistic project. More than once, the present time and the near future are seen as the final step of a long and glorious history. During the first encounter of the members of the Parallel Action, one character argues for the role of Providence in this history:

When we look ahead, he said, we see an impenetrable wall. If we look left and right, we see an overwhelming mass of important events without recognizable direction. [...] But looking back, everything, as if by a miracle, has become order and purpose... Therefore, if he might say so, we experience at every moment the mystery of a miraculous guidance.<sup>26</sup>

This sort of messianism, belonging to the Parallel Action, is built throughout the novel as an absurd and useless process of getting nothing. The members of the Parallel Action transform the realist system of

the *Biedermeier* generation into a simulation of patriotic coherence. Using the idyllic tradition – peace, culture, longevity –, the characters engaged in the final day of the Empire “outright miss the end, given that their time is occupied and their expectations are absorbed by the project and by the need to produce and consume time”<sup>27</sup>. As I mentioned earlier, this spectacular messianism is built as a labyrinthine collectivity, intended to ensure the alienation of the characters. In the case of the Parallel Action, the logic of expectation is counterbalanced by a time of denial. For example, after their meeting, no actual conclusion is drawn regarding the progress of the Action. Subsequently, the time of denial represents the opportunity of the members to refuse a clear judgment regarding the *ending history*. Finding themselves under the pressing “Something will have to be done”<sup>28</sup>, the members of the Action, incapable of articulating individual projects, remain stuck in the simulacrum of the jubilee.

In this context, Ulrich’s subjective project gains universal value. In relation with the members, he suggests the foundation of a Secretariat for Precision and Soul that would categorize the values of the Parallel Action. Nevertheless, in the end<sup>29</sup>, the only conclusion that comes for the members of the Action is that “any man may choose to die for his own ideas, but whoever induces men to die for ideas not their own is a murderer!”<sup>30</sup> While the decision of the campaign is to pronounce an attitude of vitalism, Ulrich’s project gains a universal messianism through what he calls *The Other Condition*.

For Ulrich, the Other Condition manifests itself as a consequence of the disenchantment from the older moralist

and epistemological narratives. To be more precise, this consequence is a certain re-enchantment from a different perspective. As I mentioned before, Musil recontextualizes Nietzsche’s nihilism and his interrogation of the morals and agrees that only a superior dimension of knowledge, that of being without qualities, can represent the epistemological context in which one can know oneself. While Talay-Tuner points out that the Other Condition is a withdrawal from reality, one of Ulrich’s meditations helps us understand this withdrawal as a form of valid mysticism. Using the example of a bureaucrat who goes on a holiday, starts to miss his job and feels as if his identity is purely linked with the material context, Ulrich points out that this *state of holiday* in which one is imbalanced in one’s own subjectivity is truly mysticism or the Other Condition:

a man has two modes of existence, of consciousness, and of thought, and saves himself from being frightened to death by ghosts—which this prospect would of necessity induce—by regarding one condition as a vacation from the other, an interruption, a rest, or anything else he thinks he can recognize. Mysticism, on the other hand, would be connected with the intention of going on vacation permanently.<sup>31</sup>

Ulrich refuses all prior morality in order to gain an experimental vitalism that comes through a messianic mysticism.

Nevertheless, the ambivalence of the man without qualities remains the predominant ontological fundament<sup>32</sup>. To choose a path, either of his patriotic companions or of this conservative friend,

Walter, implies adopting a quality, actualizing one of his potentialities. The true nihilistic response to the modern crisis of the self, or, to be more specific, to the absence of a subjective self, is to refuse all already given answers. Ulrich's response is the messianic mysticism of the Other Condition. In front of the modernist chaos, the man without qualities, from his position of disengagement, is allowed to say: "so I believe and don't believe"<sup>33</sup>. Due to the fact that he refuses any sort of actualization, the narration itself drifts out of the boundaries of an ending story-line. Ulrich's problem cannot be solved in modernist terms. However, a postmodernist change of perspective will allow this nihilistic uncertainty in the human interiority to reshape into a more drastic sort of pessimism towards existence.

### **Tomas: Nobody Gets Me, Not Even Myself**

According to Milan Kundera, the history of the novel came to an end almost forty years ago. Alongside the many deaths that the postmodernist era evoked, Milan Kundera is the one who theorized the death of the novel, while placing himself at the apocalyptic climax of this history. In the *Art of the Novel*, the Czech author provides a whole plethora of authors, linked by different criteria. In this brief history of literary works, Musil occupies one of the highest positions. Kundera specifies that there are four *callings* that mark the history of the novel. If Sterne and Diderot belong to the first one, Kafka to the second, Musil belongs to the *calling of thought*, in which philosophy and novelty are intertwined, in order to make the novel the supreme

synthesis of the intellect<sup>34</sup>. The last phase, according to Kundera, represents the *calling of time*, through which the novel escapes the boundaries of a single timeline (Proust is given as an example) and the novel aims to capture its whole history<sup>35</sup>.

Like many others of his generation, Kundera sensed the vibration of an apocalyptic end, in which the values of classical humanism have been deconstructed. With this vision in mind, he denounced the end of the novel and everything that was specific to it, so that, even though, after him, there will be other authors and other novels, they will fail to maintain their specific ethos: "Thus the death of the novel is not just a fanciful idea. It has already happened. And we now know how the novel dies: it's not that it disappears; it falls away from its history. Its death occurs quietly, unnoticed, and no one is outraged"<sup>36</sup>. What Kundera means by this *dissimulated death* is, in fact, the death of the formalistic dimension of the novel. In a few lines from a dialogue with Christian Salmon, Kundera argues for a rather formalist view over his novels: "Well, I'll never tire of repeating: The novel's *sole raison d'être* is to say what only the novel can say"<sup>37</sup>. He emphasizes an attitude through which the literariness of the novel is one of the main ideas at stake in his writings. On this note, a certain postmodernist feature, the inclination towards formalistic experiment, comes forward. This appetite will help Kundera develop his thematic game of variations.

The exegesis on Milan Kundera places the concept of *novel of variations* at the core of his literary practice<sup>38</sup>. Eva le Grand argues that this concept lies in the centre of a phenomenological understanding of the Czech author. Thus, Kundera's novels

are developed as thematic variations of the modern mythologies. Kundera succeeds, by placing himself at the end of the aforementioned history of callings, to integrate the teachings of his predecessors and to recontextualize them in a postmodernist manner. He is not optimistic regarding his present context, yet he offers a sceptical view on his own literary heritage – not in the sense of a nationalistic tradition, but rather that of a more complex ecosystem of literary practice that goes beyond socio-political boundaries. “The novel’s spirit is the spirit of continuity: each work is an answer to preceding ones, each work contains all the previous experience of the novel”<sup>39</sup>. From this, it is obvious that Milan Kundera, in spite of his somewhat classicist view towards literature, is rather an antimodernist. Innovating on the foundation of the literary predecessors, declaring the death of the novel and living throughout its apocalypse, Kundera could be regarded as an antimodernist who actualizes the nihilistic philosophy in his own poststructuralist contemporaneity.

Without hesitation, he creates his own history based on criteria chosen *ex nihilo* – the calling of game, of dream, of thought and of time –, he infuses his literary text with hermeneutical insights, by allowing the narrator to interpret his story while telling it and his main technique is the theme of variations. Kundera therefore confirms one of the main postmodernist ideatic vectors, that are well analysed by Fredric Jameson:

Theory – I here prefer the more cumbersome formula ‘theoretical discourse’ – has seemed unique, if not privileged, among the postmodern

arts and genres in its occasional capacity to defy the gravity of the zeitgeist and to produce schools, movements, and even avant-gardes where they are no longer supposed to exist.<sup>40</sup>

This appetite towards relativism leads to the understanding of the *zeitgeist* in Kundera’s novels.

Eva Le Grand describes Kundera as *the ruthless debunker of all Absolutes*<sup>41</sup>, emphasizing that his aim is to portray the relativity of human knowledge. Indeed, the purpose of the novel, according to Kundera, is to comprehend the human essence<sup>42</sup>. More precisely, the aim is to understand the core, *the existential code*<sup>43</sup> of the self, according to its historical determinations. What I will try to argue is that this *existential code* – Kundera even uses this concept when talking about *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* – is composed out of what Matei Călinescu calls *epistemological nihilism*. This nihilistic category is best suited for encompassing the disenchantment between total relativity and the human essence Kundera discusses. Moreover, when Kundera mentions this relative epistemological human essence, he does not mention that it was an eternal condition, but rather the consequence of a philosophical and literary tradition that consumed itself. In this regard, Kundera aligns once more with Jameson. His belief on the death of the subject is a historical one, although it is endowed with an economical value: “a once-existing centered subject, in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family, has today in the world of organizational bureaucracy dissolved”<sup>44</sup>.

The death of the subject, blasting modernist myths and the loss of interiority



– these are the main criteria that characterize the Kunderanian *Weltanschauung*. In this new context, the characters become paper inventions, mere ideas that come out of the narrator's mind, impossible to meet in real life. Nonetheless, they become agents that emerge out of *meditative interrogation*<sup>45</sup>.

Following Fokkema, Călinescu names epistemological nihilism “a pervasive sense of radical, unsurpassable uncertainty”<sup>46</sup>. Călinescu goes on to argue that the modernist appetite towards hypothesis, towards problematizing in a high modernist style lost all its credibility. The uncertainty Călinescu mentions comes with the decline of affectivity, of mysticism and belief towards messianic narrations or, as Jameson puts it, “the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and memory”<sup>47</sup>.

The overview on this scission is nothing but pessimistic. Kundera is a nihilist novelist that engages in a process of questioning the human code of existence using the epistemological tools of the postmodernist ethos. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* represents one of Milan Kundera's most popular novels, one that encapsulates a full meditation towards the humanist myths. In the case of Kundera, epistemological nihilism must not be understood as a blank state and a conclusion towards existence, but as a set of strategies that aid the reader in understanding a vision and in articulating the *Weltanschauung* of a nihilistic postmodernism.

Just as Ulrich, when first confronted with the absence of God and the lack of a sufficient reason, grappled with the weight of reality on his own subjectivity, Tomas,

the protagonist of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, is forced to accept the fact that, if there is no God and no return, life is as if it never existed: “*Einmal ist keinmal*, says Tomas to himself. What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all”<sup>48</sup>. This is the starting point for Tomas, for the understanding of the complex nihilistic view of Kundera's narrative world.

In a truly postmodernist fashion, the narrator enunciates that Tomas and Tereza are two narratological inventions: “They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation. Tomas was born of the saying *Einmal ist keinmal*. Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach”<sup>49</sup>. They represent a variation on the theme of Don Juan and the traumatic relationship between mother and daughter. As I mentioned before, Kundera's novel is built on a dialectic of relationships, in which the personal and almost metaphysical dimension of the characters are clearly positioned above the historical context they inhabit. If, for Musil, history had a relevant importance through the jubilee, for Kundera, history is nothing but a context set in the background.

Nevertheless, this historical background acts upon Tomas and Tereza in a circular motion, from the centre outwards. Throughout the action of the novel, the reader witnesses Tomas' downfall from his socially elevated position, namely that of a surgeon. He writes a short article about the way in which the “innocent” communists that reject their former accusation as murderers resemble the tragic story of Oedip who could not believe the reality

of the crime he had committed. After he published it, the communist regime from Czechoslovakia pressured Tomas to revise a statement that had been misinterpreted as a call for the communist political members to gouge out their eyes. Tomas finds himself in a state of confusion, while explaining that he never wanted to imply such a thing. Refusing to back down and to publicly apologize for something that he had not done, he keeps strong to his ideal and his sense of justice. Consequently, he is fired from his position in the main hospital and is forced to move to the suburbs of Prague. Because of this incident, his existence will progressively move towards the outskirts of the centre of the country. In the end, the reader finds Tomas as a farmer in a forgotten village.

This almost centrifugal force that drives Tomas from centre to the margins is simultaneous with the dynamics between him and Teresa. His life is governed by two forces that act upon him in order to gain a sentiment of stability. On the one hand, he was the one who chose the life of a doctor and, ultimately, this life refused him. On the other hand, he was chosen by Tereza in a glimpse of chance. The dialectic between Tereza and his profession are constructed as a dichotomy of subjective choice and the force of randomness, of probability:

Later, lying next to Tereza, he recalled that he had been led to her by a chain of laughable coincidences that took place seven years earlier [...]. Does that mean his life lacked any “*Es muss sein!*,” any overriding necessity? In my opinion, it did have one. But it was not love, it was his profession. He had come to medicine not by coincidence

or calculation but by a deep inner desire.<sup>50</sup>

His life comes, in spite of all his subjective and individual endeavours, to be governed by the chance of Teresa, the chance of love in this case. In a specific Kunderanian sense, the irony of Tomas’ Don Juan-ism is clear. While he was the one who, in his youth, seduced women – he even cheated on Teresa –, he ultimately became completely bound to her. He follows her with a force that even he could not understand. Thus, when he is forced to leave behind a life dedicated to medicine and to undertake the life of a window cleaner, Tomas realizes the lightness, the easiness of not following an internal “*Es muss sein!*”: This was the first time he had felt that blissful indifference<sup>51</sup>.

Ulrich’s hyper-consciousness of reality is transformed by history and chance into *blissful indifference*. Tomas seems to follow Jameson’s idea according to which postmodernism comes with “a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense”<sup>52</sup>, in which alienation is no longer possible. Following Teresa back in Czechoslovakia, following her in the countryside, as per her request, all were accepted by Tomas with an intriguing platitude that came from the dissipation of all great narrations regarding destiny, power, and relevance. In this postmodernist light, irony and laughter become Kundera’s tools to dismantle all these myths: the photos taken by Teresa in order to expose the brutality of the communist army are used by the regime to identify suspects and protesters. When his own son comes after many years to drag him into a subversive community against the regime, he cannot make up his mind, for

he couldn't find neither a good nor a bad argument for or against it. Surrounded by discourses, Tomas becomes unable to pick one and stick to it, for when all discourses grabbed him and dragged him without his will, all of them lost any relevance: "What then should he have done? Sign or not? Another way of formulating the question is, Is it better to shout and thereby hasten the end, or to keep silent and gain thereby a slower death? Is there any answer to these questions? And again he thought the thought we already know..."<sup>53</sup>

This nihilistic emptiness is the one that ends Tomas' story. While Nietzschean messianism allowed Ulrich to grab the entire generation that preceded him and to question it, Tomas refuses any type of mission that, retrospectively, he could be meant for. In the very last scene of the novel, Teresa and Tomas dance together at a local bar in the village. During their dance, Teresa confesses to him that he had actually lost his mission because of her. He denies these sorts of statements and tells her that he is happy. Disenchanted from the great narrations of messianic relevance, of historical avenger, Tomas feels the lightness of not being involved. The idea of mission becomes a parody and Kundera, in a post-modern fashion, blows it up: "Missions are stupid, Tereza. I have no mission. No one has. And it's a terrific relief to realize you're free, free of all missions"<sup>54</sup>.

The epistemic nihilism that Călinescu evokes comes to cover Tomas' ethos towards a reality of which his agency is completely irrelevant. As Milan Kundera pointed out when he talked about the art of the novel: "Between the act and himself, a chasm opens. Man hopes to reveal his own image through his act, but that image

bears no resemblance to him."<sup>55</sup> The uncertainty of reality, its textualist fundament and the idea of difference as basis for the postmodernist epistemology,<sup>56</sup> led to the point in which choice becomes rather difficult, but not because of ignorance, but because of the way the discourse is handled. In Houellebecq's nihilistic view, it will be indifference that governs the self, while in the case of Kundera's protagonist, a process of *desengaño* is central in understanding his nihilistic perspective.

Finally, the central discourse of Nietzschean inspiration is instrumented in a manner that is rather different from Musil's. For Musil, there was no eternal return, but a Judeo-Christian timeline that gave messianic heaviness to existence. In the case of Kundera, there is neither eternal return, nor Christian temporality. A complete mundane timeline seems to set the characters free. If, for Nietzsche, the eternal return hinders the human existence and makes life weigh rather heavily – because all of your actions will remain eternal and repetitive once you carry them out – the godless timeline of Kundera's *Weltanschauung* gives all actions ease. However, because there is no second return, the only life an individual has makes it impossible to distinguish right from wrong. Here, the epistemological nihilism rises at its finest. There is no way of knowing which path is truly correct: the chance that brought Teresa to his door or his dedication to medicine. Thus, the disenchantment and the immobility of action rise and give this lightness of being an unbearable heaviness. This paradoxical heaviness is Kundera's answer to the nihilistic polemics on freedom. It will come down to Houellebecq's more drastic and more pessimistic view towards

self and reality that will project the individual in his post-apocalyptic world, a world of simulacrum.

### **François: Submission Is Not a Bad Thing... Nor Is It a Good One**

Michael Houellebecq was often regarded as an islamophobe. The attitude he presents in *Submission* towards the Islamic party and the president Ben Abbas was interpreted as a harsh Eurocentric critique towards the issue of middle-eastern immigrants in France. A political analysis of this novel can expose some of the ideatic mechanisms used by Houellebecq and can provide certain left-wing class consciousness towards the aforementioned matter, but this is not the main aim of my argument.

What I aim here, in line with Musil and Kundera, is to show how the nihilistic view towards reality has developed in accordance with our contemporaneity. What I suggest is for us to take a look at the way in which the individual interacts with the socio-political context. Moreover, through his adapting strategies, a certain *ethos* of contemporaneity will be highlighted, an *ethos* that can be best expressed through Baudrillard's concept of transparent nihilism.

By employing a deductive strategy, I will emphasize that the high modernist style of Musil, with its baroque and extensive descriptions, with its stream of thoughts and the shift of the focus from one consciousness to another, was changed by Kundera's textualism, his characters born out of ideas and images, with his intertextual vectors and his narrative artifices. If Kundera can be regarded as a

representative of the last formalistic innovations, with Houellebecq – alongside the other figures from his generation – the novel returns to a new form of realism, one that is milder and more flexible than that of the nineteenth century. To understand the stylistic and the broader picture of his theoretical strategies, I adopted the concept of *depressive realism*, as theorized by Colin Feltham<sup>57</sup>. The author highlights that this concept is rather an umbrella term – given the fact that it can be used interdisciplinary – that covers an idea, and not a rigid set of rules. “Depressive realism as it is translated from psychology to philosophy can be said to refer to the belief that phenomena are accurately perceived as having negative weighting”<sup>58</sup>. Some of its main characteristics are weariness, melancholy towards the idea that everything has already happened before, or incredulity and scepticism towards the main political ambitions of his time. In a sense, Tomas or Teresa could be defined by this term, yet their strong relationship, culminating in an almost poetic death, adds a layer of sentimental weight to the characters.

However, in the case of Houellebecq's protagonist, François, the reader is met by a lonely professor, with very superficial relationships that do not actually provide life with much meaning. Although the novel is written as a diary, the subjective narration of the events exposes the specific passiveness and cynicism of a disenchanting man that lives only through the memories and knowledge gained while studying about the nineteenth century French writer, Huysmans. François lives within toxic relationships, like the one between him and Myriam, a young girl that, despite the age gap, is the only person to whom he is really

attached, because she was the one that offered him the best sexual experiences<sup>59</sup>.

In François' case, there is a different regime of interaction with the social. The Houellebecqian *zeitgeist* is built upon what Baudrillard calls *the precedence of simulacra*. The experiences of the individual are no longer connected with the concrete sense of a specific metaphysical system (be it political, theological or philosophical), but are rather built on the basis of different models of signification that lost their referent. The way in which the individual integrates the social is framed by a system of signs, more than a system of meaning. From this point, a *Weltanschauung* in which the sign replaces the meaning, in which the signifier no longer has a signified, can be called, according to Baudrillard, *the era of simulation*<sup>60</sup>. I will discuss two episodes that expose this precedence of simulacra. Consequently, I conclude that this epistemological attitude towards reality leads to the nihilistic practice that for Baudrillard is called transparent.

One of the most intriguing scenes in which the signs of the real take over reality itself focuses on Myriam's response when she finds out that Ben Abbes, a Muslim candidate to the presidency of France, is present for the elections. She and her family are moving to Israel, for they are Hebrews, long before the elections. In her case, the threatening signs are far worse than the real experience of terrorism: "It might seem strange, she wrote, to leave a country like France because you were afraid of hypothetical dangers, only to emigrate to a country where the dangers weren't the least bit hypothetical"<sup>61</sup>. In her case, there is nostalgia for the real, in spite of the simulacra that precedes it. Moreover, this nostalgia works at its best in this

case, where the passion for the real comes with a passion for experience, for intensity and vitalism – in this case, this experience is marked by the terrorist attacks that had already been normalized in Tel Aviv.

For François, the regime of signs over content works at its best in his attempt to convert to Catholicism. Although he declares himself an atheist in the beginning of the novel, he decides to isolate himself for a month, at the monastery of Rocamadour, hoping to find sense and unity, besides the mediatic spectacle that he had to face in France. However, the project fails and the protagonist returns to Paris: "After half an hour, I got up, fully deserted by the Spirit, reduced to my damaged, perishable body, and I sadly descended the stairs that led to the parking lot"<sup>62</sup>. It is worth asking why this project failed. So true in appearance, this project was François' last attempt to escape the existential crisis. However, following the reasoning behind this entire process, we find out that, in spite of an authentic calling towards theology, the protagonist engages in this adventure because Huysmans, in his time, did the exact same thing. François believes that because his literary idol succeeded in converting to Catholicism, he would be able to do the same thing if he followed certain rules. The sentiment of mysticism is dismantled into hunger. Auditing a play about Holy Mary and Jesus Christ, feeling as if the characters gained a mystical aura, François comes to his senses and concludes that he is, in fact, hungry. These scenes clearly show that one of the main strategies of interaction with the social, the political, the real in general, is based on the precedence of simulacra, mere signs of the real that cannot offer a concrete experience of the real. Even the

elections are seen through the filter of the TV, a fact that allows the protagonist, although his colleagues are deeply involved in these elections, to gain distance and to treat the whole process as any random citizen would.

Transparent nihilism encapsulates, according to Baudrillard, a worldview in which any sort of apocalypse is incomprehensible. Once that appearances (Nietzschean nihilism) and sense (epistemic nihilism) have dominated their times, transparent nihilism arises today in order to affirm a more pessimistic view on reality. Now, every action, regardless of its significance, is completely irrelevant, transparent, and no measure against or in relation to it holds any value. From this, "the precession of the neutral, of forms of the neutral and of indifference"<sup>63</sup> gains a higher ground and remains the only attitude left in the face of a reality that is indistinguishable from its simulacra. Moreover, this indifference is counterbalanced by a media-driven fascination with image and simulacrum. The individual is fascinated by the spectacle of events, which no longer have a true impact.

This is the *Weltanschauung* that Houellebecq outlines in his novel. In addition, this aspect is seen more profoundly in the last scene of *Submission*. After François returns to Paris, he has to choose whether or not to convert to Islam. If not, he will be forced to resign from the university. If he chooses to stay, he would have to take more than one wife, to obey to the rules of the new government and to act in a way that contradicts his true beliefs. Ultimately, the protagonist's choice is not revealed to the reader. François' final meditation uses the past tense of the verb *will*, an aspect that, at its best, exposes the transparent nihilistic

attitude towards big changes – regardless of whether they are social or individual. The use of the form *would* to describe the potentiality of accepting, exposes the fact that, in the end, the choice one makes is completely irrelevant. Moreover, besides this irrelevance, the attitude that François adopts is one of complete neutrality. He projects the entire scenario of acceptance in his head, leaving behind all of his beliefs, leaving Myriam behind, and his conclusion is much more significant, given its neutrality: "I would have nothing to mourn"<sup>64</sup>.

In the end, what he chooses does not matter, for the choice no longer has epistemic or ontological value. In complete ignorance, the individual event is blasted into thousands of pieces that carry no weight. For Kundera, the hazard of chances gained importance, but for Houellebecq, in a transparent nihilistic philosophical regime, this lightness of being is received as lightness; hence, it is interiorized as neutrality.

While Musil's nihilism had a liberating dimension that freed Ulrich from the *fin-du-siecle* Vienna, Kundera's nihilism freed Tomas from the heaviness of a messianic mission. Finally, through Houellebecq, his nihilism frees the individual from any act, from any responsibility and value and with this, a post-apocalyptic horizon is opened. For *Submission* is neither a dystopia nor a utopia; for these extremes are no longer relevant in the transparent nihilistic regime. Houellebecq refuses to offer axiological value to the presidency of Ben Abbes, mentioning that he is a moderate candidate. The social can imagine neither an apocalypse, nor an action that will truly bring a revolutionary shift: this expectation was left behind once with the Kafkaesque Parallel Campaign.

In the end, this evolution of nihilistic thought exposes an immense process of *desengaño*. The death of the great narrations is replaced by a full spectrum of relative discourses. Finally, in the face of the created simulacrum, these discourses

lose all ontological meaning, in a context in which the individual uses neutrality to protect their *status quo*. In the face of this precedence of neutrality, only responsibility and discernment represent viable responses.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agamben, Giorgio, *Potentialities*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2019.
- Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Braga, Corin, *Distant Theory. O abordare distanțată a paradigmelor culturale*, in Ursa, Mihaela (coord.), *Comparatismul clujean. Instantaneu în mișcare*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022.
- Călinescu, Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1987.
- Feltham, Colin, *Depressive Realism. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 2017.
- Heller-Ivancenko, Andreea, *Condiția mesianică în romanul crepuscular*, București, Tracus Arte, 2019.
- Houellebecq, Michel, *Submission*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux Publishers, 2015.
- Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991.
- Kundera, Milan, *Testaments Betrayed*, New York, Harpercollins, 1995.
- Kundera, Milan, *The Art of the Novel*, New York, Grove Press, 1988.
- Kundera, Milan, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York, Harper Collins, 2023.
- Le Grand, Eva, *Kundera sau memoria dorinței*, preface by Guy Scarpetta, București, Albatros, 2003.
- Musil, Robert, *The Man Without Qualities*, London, Picador, 2017.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Payne, Philip, *Robert Musil's „A Man without Qualities”. A Critical Study*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Talay-Turner, Zeynep, *Philosophy, Literature and the Dissolution of the Subject. Nietzsche, Musil, Atay*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2014.

## NOTES

1. Corin Braga, “Distant Theory. O abordare distanțată a paradigmelor culturale”, in Mihaela Ursa (coord.), *Comparatismul clujean. Instantaneu în mișcare*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022, p. 37: “... o poziție distanțată față de aceste sisteme, o abordare care să accepte faptul că ele nu sunt explicații corecte și fiabile ale realității exterioare sau interioare, ci doar narațiuni totalizatoare elaborate de teologi, filosofi și antropologi pentru a înțelege natura fizică și mintea umană.” (translation mine).
2. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, London, Picador, 2017.
3. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York, Harper Collins, 2023.
4. Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux Publishers, 2015.
5. Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1987, p. 192.
6. Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, New York, Harpercollins, 1995, p. 85.
7. Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
8. Zeynep Talay-Turner, *Philosophy, Literature and the Dissolution of the Subject. Nietzsche, Musil, Atay*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2014, p. 101.

9. *Ibidem*, p. 110.
10. Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 165.
12. Zeynep Talay-Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
13. Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, p. 161-162.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 29.
15. Philip Payne, *Robert Musil's "A Man without Qualities". A Critical Study*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 99.
16. Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, 719.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 721.
18. Zeynep Talay-Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
19. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2019.
20. Zeynep Talay-Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
21. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 35.
22. Philip Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 98-99.
23. Matei Călinescu, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
24. Zeynep Talay-Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 131
25. Andreea Heller-Invancenکو dedicates a chapter to the logic of expectation, in which she actualizes the discourse of the Judeo-Christian messianic discourse to the context of the twenty century need for a political change, see Andreea Heller-Invancenکو, *Condiția mesianică în romanul crepuscular*, București, Tracus Arte, 2019.
26. Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
27. Heller-Invancenکو, *op. cit.*, p. 171: "având timpul ocupat și așteptarea absorbită de proiect și de nevoia de a consuma și produce timp." (translation mine).
28. Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, 676.
29. Here I refer to the end of the published version of *The Man Without Qualities*, not the posthumous chapters that were published later.
30. Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, p. 115
31. *Ibidem*, p. 863
32. Zeynep Talay-Turner provides a short logical argument following Nietzsche's philosophy, and it goes something like this: Musil questions both the scientific knowledge and the moral values of his era, but he is neither an anti-rationalist, nor an amoral. This stance explains the ambivalence in his attitude, as well as his blockage in the present. His protagonist must be a man of the present if he is to question the ethical code of the past and the scientific progress of the future.
33. Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, p. 866.
34. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, New York, Grove Press, 1988, p. 21.
35. *Ibidem*.
36. *Ibidem*, p. 20.
37. *Ibidem*, p. 34.
38. Eva Le Grand, *Kundera sau memoria dorinței*, preface by Guy Scarpetta, București, Albatros, 2003, p. 100.
39. Milan Kundera, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
40. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991, p. XVI.
41. Eva Le Grand, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
42. Milan Kundera, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
43. *Ibidem*, p. 29.
44. Fredric Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
45. Milan Kundera, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
46. Matei Călinescu, *op. cit.*, p. 305.



47. Fredric Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
48. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York, HarperCollins, 2023, p. 14.
49. *Ibidem*, p. 36.
50. *Ibidem*, p. 147.
51. *Ibidem*, p. 150.
52. Fredric Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
53. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York, HarperCollins, 2023, p. 170.
54. *Ibidem*, p. 237.
55. Idem., *The Art of the Novel*, p. 25-25.
56. Fredric Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 31. Jameson, truly lucid in his analysis on postmodernism, observes how theories fractally multiplied to the point where any sense of unity was lost. Consequently, the postmodernist theoretical practice, responding to the crisis of unity, transformed the idea of difference to a specific function of postmodernism, in a rather reductionist style.
57. Colin Feltham, *Depressive Realism. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 2017.
58. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
59. Michel Houellebecq, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
60. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 3.
61. Michel Houellebecq, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
62. *Ibidem*, p. 117.
63. Jean Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
64. Michel Houellebecq, *op. cit.*, p. 206.