

“Love Is a Losing Game”:¹ Textual Games in Milan Kundera’s “The Hitchhiking Game”

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Summary

A couple who indulge in a tongue-in-cheek game of pretence soon discover that role-play can, in fact, reveal more about themselves – their real selves – and their partner, than it conceals. What begins on a whim as an indulgent and innocent bit of sport soon spirals out of control to threaten the dynamics of the couple's relationship, increasingly hampering their ability to distinguish between fact and fantasy. The authors of this article contend that Milan Kundera's "The Hitchhiking Game", one of seven short stories in the anthology *Laughable Loves* (1974), benefits from being read in terms of Roger Caillois's (1967) taxonomy of games and play, which differentiates between competition, chance, mimicry and vertigo in respect of players' attitudes towards play. This theory is expanded by Wolfgang Iser (1993), who relates these four categories to the analysis of texts, introducing the concept of textual games. Employing the *mimicry—chance* binary seems particularly apt for this story as it highlights the unlimited potential for sustained illusion, as opposed to the limitations imposed by the finite nature of the text and the characters' eventual disillusionment. In this tale of erotic love, the laughter hinted at in the title of the anthology is revealed to be rather wry, personal identity is shown to be ambiguous, and love often appears to be tainted by uncertainty.

Opsomming

'n Paartjie wat in ligte luim uiting gee aan hul verbeelding besef maar al te gou dat rolspele baie meer verklap aangaande hul ware persoonlikhede as wat dit verdoes. Hul speletjie begin op die ingewing van die oomblik as oënskynlik skadelose pret, maar dinge raak vinnig buite beheer wanneer dit al hoe moeiliker word om te onderskei tussen feit en fiksie, en hul verhoudingsdynamiek boonop bedreig word. Die outeurs van hierdie artikel is van mening dat Milan Kundera se "The Hitchhiking Game" [Die ryloopspeletjie – EC], een van sewe kortverhale in die bundel *Laughable Loves* (Lagwekkende liefdes – EC) sal baat vind indien dit gelees word aan die hand van Roger Caillois (1967) se taksonomie van spel: hy onderskei tussen kompetisie, noodlot/kans, verbeelding/nabootsing en vervoering as dryfvere vir menslike spel. Wolfgang Iser (1993) bou hierdie teorie uit deur te verduidelik hoe die vier

1. Track 6 on the Amy Winehouse album *Back to Black* (2007).

kategoriseë verband hou met teks-analise en met teks-georiënteerde spel. In hierdie kortverhaal is die *nabootsing/noodlotparing* besonder gepas: dit maak voorsiening vir die ontelbare permutasies wat volgehoue illusie inhou, maar ook vir die beperkende aard van die teks en die karakters se uiteindelijke ontnugtering. In hierdie verhaal van erotiese liefde blyk die gelag waarna die titel van die bundel verwys wrang te wees, karakters se identiteit is onstellend plooibaar, en liefde word meedoënloos gefolter deur onsekerheid.

Introduction

Over futile odds
And laughed at by the gods
And now the final frame
Love is a losing game
—Amy Winehouse (2007)

It may seem unusual to revisit “The Hitchhiking Game”, one of seven short stories which make up *Laughable Loves*, a largely unknown anthology by Milan Kundera, first published in Czech as *Směšné Lásky* (1968), and subsequently revised and translated² into various languages. The collection of short stories constitutes Kundera’s sole foray into this literary genre to date, but his oeuvre has since expanded to include novels as well as works of literary criticism. Given his Central European heritage (see Boyer-Weinmann 2009: 14), references to Czechoslovakia’s history and geography appear in Kundera’s work, thus linking it to a national narrative (Ebersole 2012: 1). Kundera revealed that he had completed the final story in this collection three days before the Soviet invasion of 1968 (Čulík 2000: 19). Jeffrey Goldfarb (in Carroll 1992: 109) emphasises that while these short stories are apolitical, they bear traces of the domination and subjugation associated with living under a Communist dispensation. It is therefore possible that “dark humor, satire, irony, paradox, allegory, and other forms of rich aesthetic play” (Ebersole 2012: 1) formed part of the author’s artistic reaction to the socio-political context he experienced in Czechoslovakia, and were the devices he continued to use from 1975 as he pursued his career as a writer, in exile, in France. Perhaps on a lighter note, Kundera has suggested that the tendency towards the ludic in his writing might be due to the “metaphysical significance” of celebrating his birthday on April 1st (Liehm in Boyer-Weinmann 2009: 16).

Numerous scholars have proposed ways in which to approach Kundera’s writings (Misurella 1999; Maixent 1998; Boyer-Weinmann 2009). Particularly pertinent is the cyclic nature of Kundera’s writings (see especially

2. The English version used for this article is by Suzanne Rappaport (1974). The authors also studied the 1970 French version, entitled “Le jeu de l’auto-stop”, translated by F. Kérel.

Carroll 1992), which not only strengthens the idea of recurring topoi and intertextual similarities, but might possibly guide the reader in identifying themes within *Laughable Loves* treated in greater depth in subsequent novels – Chvatík (1995: 54), for instance, views this anthology as an incubator for Kundera’s later novels. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on recurring themes such as laughter and ironic humour (Donahue 1984; Hattingh 1995; Weeks 2005), paradox and duality (Banerjee 1992; Chvatík 1995), and the erotic and the sexual (Sturdivant 1985).

Various researchers have touched on elements of games and play in Kundera’s writing, but to our knowledge never in terms of a taxonomy of games and play. As Kundera explained, “playing games is an important source of pleasure. Real life is linked to a series of deceptions. It disappoints us with its futility The modern world frightens me because it’s rapidly losing its sense of the playfulness of play” (Kundera in Holmberg 1985: 25). Guided by Kundera’s comment, this article narrows the focus by investigating the ludic in “The Hitchhiking Game”, applying Caillois’s (1967) categorisation of games and Iser’s (1993) conception of textual games for a more in-depth analysis of the principle of play in this work. Theory on games further enhances insight into the dark side of this short story’s intrigue, when the protagonists become entrapped in their own game and are unable to return to their original positions. Our hypothesis is that such a reading allows for a better understanding of the interpersonal dynamics at work in “The Hitchhiking Game”, whereas this and other of Caillois’s categorisations may also apply to stories in the rest of Kundera’s anthology – and, indeed, to his novelistic oeuvre as a whole.

For the sake of clarity, our study commences with an outline of “The Hitchhiking Game”, followed by a brief review of the other stories in the anthology, so as to contextualise the specific short story under investigation. Next, a synopsis is given of select theories on play, focusing specifically on Roger Caillois’s four categories of play and Iser’s application of these to the text. These taxonomies are then applied to the short story in question, once the positionality of the two “players” in the game has been established. Our analysis of Kundera’s characters will reveal whether play is always truly and only playful. The article concludes with an overview of the typically wry humour which is evident in much of Kundera’s writing, and which is certainly reflected in the story under scrutiny here.

Contextualising “The Hitchhiking Game”

Kundera’s textual gamesmanship is reviewed in terms of what occurs when an unusually shy girl becomes daring and sets off a series of events she could never have anticipated. “The Hitchhiking Game” depicts love play that starts out as a light-hearted and provocative game of pretence but soon

becomes fraught and sadistic. A young man and a young woman – a couple in a committed relationship – are driving to their holiday destination when they need to stop for petrol. The girl jumps out to take a bathroom break, and on her return plays at being a hitchhiker in need of a lift. As she gets into her boyfriend's car she pretends to be a stranger, and he plays along. During the ensuing game neither player behaves true to character, thus changing the interpersonal dynamics of their relationship. Soon, the sexually charged play between the two “strangers” becomes a real power struggle in which, in typical Kundera fashion, any silliness has serious and often unexpected consequences. Their play is the motivation for reading this story in terms of a game.

The question arises whether Kundera employs play and games in the other short stories in this anthology, and, if so, who the “players” are who populate *Laughable Loves*. In modern-day parlance, the term “player” can apply to anyone who participates (voluntarily or unwillingly) in a game, but in “Nobody Will Laugh” one of the characters, the hapless Mr Zaturetsky, is unwittingly drawn into a game which closely resembles an adult version of hide-and-seek. “The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire” and “Dr Havel after Twenty Years” depict “players” who have lost their touch with the ladies, and have become so pathetic and impotent that they can only bask in the reflected glow of their former prowess. “Let the Old Dead Make Room for the Young Dead” sees a man encountering a past love, but age has not been kind to either party and all that remains of their former relationship is a memento mori of a past romance – a monument to an erstwhile love that is impossible to recapture. “Edward and God” sees Edward manipulating a naive woman into surrendering her virginity to him, but in the end he is entrapped by his own lies and schemes.

Just as the main characters all have a “game plan” at the outset of each of the stories, so Kundera had a plan in structuring *Laughable Loves* along clear mathematical outlines: of the seven stories in the anthology, the fourth acts as a central nexus that unifies many of the themes identifiable in the other stories. In addition, he alternates light and dark tones by following up a light-hearted tale with a story which has more sombre undertones (usually revolving around erotic or sexual relations) (see Chvatík 1995; Maixent 1998). Only upon having read the whole anthology is the reader able to identify these “motifs in retrospect” (Smith in Carroll 1992: 141). In particular, the cyclical form of the text allows the reader to benefit from doubling back on the preceding short stories to arrive at a better understanding of the whole (Gereben in Carroll 1992: 138), thanks to repetitions and recurring themes involving similar characters or types. As a closure technique, circularity implies that it is impossible to escape this never-ending circle, where what is read at the end is reminiscent of what happened at the beginning – either in the language, in events, or in the characters' experiences of feeling stuck (Torgovnick in Carroll 1992: 143).

This cyclic approach echoes the nature of most games, which can be reprised under similar conditions, in the same place, by the same players, yet have a completely different and unexpected outcome. Most games unfold in cyclical rather than chronological stages: all games contain elements of anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding (gathering of information and synthesis of disparate ideas), strength (in overcoming a hurdle), and then the ease, prowess and poise that come with having mastered a skill or restored the equilibrium (Eberle in Brown 2010: 19). In “The Hitchhiking Game”, the question is whether this perfect circle will be attained and closure achieved.

Theorising Games

Findings from studies on games and play, which have a bearing on the short story under discussion here, focus on an adult’s capacity to take a playful approach to life (cf. Brown 2010); on how games of a challenging nature improve a person’s ability to improvise and adapt, thereby avoiding entropy (Brown 2010: 18); on how humans, as social beings, regulate or modify their actions and adhere to or break the rules to fit in and avoid being ostracised (cf. Berne 2008); in the psychoanalytical tradition, on how individuals potentially learn something or derive healing from play (Cohen 1993: 7); and on “dark” or undisciplined play (Kane 2005: 58-61; Myers n.d.) which highlights the benefits derived from giving in to bad/negative play, where risk-taking and aggression are rewarded. The Internet abounds with sites dedicated to sex games and role-play, where so-called “safe words” can be used to end dangerous or unsettling sexual experimentation between two or more partners.

What is appealing in any type of play are the elements of risk and uncertainty. Play, despite its seeming frivolity and ease, can lead to someone getting hurt. As a result, what starts out as a friendly game can easily spiral into a war of words, then physical violence and no-holds-barred all-out war – the characters in “The Hitchhiking Game” soon find themselves in this kind of downward spiral. To avoid such a scenario and to give structure to a game, the rule books outline what is acceptable or permissible (or not). Failure to play by the rules would constitute a violation of the fundamental law of games, as outlined by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1970), first published in 1938. But what if there were no predetermined rules, as is the case with the make-believe scenario created by the couple in this story?

Huizinga (1970) interrogates humans’ impulse to play. In his view, games cannot be categorised as “good” or “bad” – people make them so. He stresses that participation should be voluntary, and each player should be allowed to determine the extent of their involvement or the risk they take, i.e., how far they should push the limits of the game. Eric Berne (2008: 67)

categorises three levels of play, based on their intensity, the degree of human involvement, and the eventual outcome: first-degree games are fun and socially acceptable; second-degree games cause no permanent damage, but the play remains private or hidden from public view; but third-degree games are at the other end of the spectrum: here, winning is everything and players could end up in hospital, in court, or in a morgue.

Caillois's Four Categories of Games merged with Iser's Textual Approach

Caillois's *Les Jeux et les Hommes* [*Man, Play and Games*] is a sociological study in which games and freer forms of play are categorised in terms of how they operate within societies (1967: 10). In the "alternative worlds" (Henricks 2010: 172) created by games, people are presented with an opportunity to play through the possibilities of life, yet to potentially find satisfactions otherwise denied them – this duality is a vital point of departure when scrutinising the short story under discussion here. In Caillois's (1967: 53ff) analysis of games, the categories or attitudes which he distinguishes involve how individuals reposition themselves in the world as they enact certain prototypes (Iser 1993: 259).

Regardless of a player's positionality during a game – which fluctuates – once the game is over, conditions should revert to "normal" – i.e., a player's "real life" should not be changed in any permanent way (Caillois 1967: 9). In applying this notion to literature, play within a text cannot be sustained indefinitely because a text is finite. Yet play can be prolonged by means of two types of textual games, namely instrumental play and free play, which are always pitted against each other in what is called interplay (Iser 1993: 257-258, 260, 263). Whereas instrumental play is used to secure a victory or desired end result, free play follows a back-and-forth motion, which gives rise to unexpected developments and thus broadens the potential for meaning. Interestingly, instrumental play can equally incorporate elements of open-endedness and playfulness, whereas, on the other hand, a player can use free play to achieve a specific aim. This counterflow works against the expectations of the reader, because play movements or countermoves not only block another player's intentions, but also create possible new scenarios. This is where the fictive and the imaginary flow together as the basic components of play. The text as play is the transformation of its own position(s), in that play changes that which is already in play (Iser 1993: 271).

Although Caillois (1967: 47-75) differentiates between four categories – *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx* – in texts such games seldom manifest singly but are rather employed as amalgamations of individual patterns. *Agôn* pertains to games of competition which rely on a competitor's mental or

physical prowess, manifesting as “willful assertion” (Henricks 2010: 167). Here it is relevant for the element of conflict which it brings to the text.

More pertinent for our purposes is *alea*, commonly encompassing games of chance which rely on a “willful surrender to external forces” (Henricks 2010: 167). Iser (1993: 261) notes that the *aleatory* aspect of a game brings the unforeseeable into the restrictedness of a text, and thus acts as the “driving force” within the text. As a rule, the player(s) cannot affect the outcome of the game, and the characters in “The Hitchhiking Game” surrender themselves and their eventual fates to wherever the game takes them – to quote Iser (1993: 264), “endlessness outplays finality”. In terms of play movement, free play relating to *alea* is completely unrestricted and counters any predetermined intention (p. 271), thus triumphing over instrumental play, but it also means the characters in the text will continue to be played by the games they play.

While games of *alea* do not require players to be anything but themselves, in games of *mimicry* or simulation, the player plays at being someone or something else, yet in such a way that difference disappears and illusion is refined (Iser 1993: 262). However, free play seeks to undo difference, to counter instrumental play (p. 271), thus the individual games remove any restrictions and work to overturn one another: “games against games, as played in the text game” (p. 272). In “The Hitchhiking Game”, *mimicry* is primarily employed: it includes games where illusion, disguises and trickery serve to create a make-believe world; an artificial scenario where the imagination is given free reign and reality is suspended. As the term implies, the world that is created mimics the real, to the extent where participants – and often the audience/reader – are mesmerised by the unfolding transformation. This aspect manifests, for example, when children play dress-up to create a fantasy world with its own set of flexible rules revolving around play-acting. However, once the illusion is broken the pretence is revealed, and what it presumably shows is a “reality” where any assumed difference between the individual and the character s/he was playing reappears, making transparent that which was hidden. In this sense *mimicry* counters *alea*, as the text is neither pretended reality nor a true reflection of something, but becomes the setting in which the unpredictable unfolds (Iser 1993: 262).

Finally, the vertiginous sensation (*ilinx*) derived from certain types of play does manifest in this short story, but only as sensations which the characters experience at specific moments – their motives are not to pursue corporeal disorientation, or to chase after feelings of vertiginous exhilaration. This element of the textual game is used to reverse events or subvert intentions (Iser 1993: 263).

In the interplay between the categories, the various interdependent elements oscillate by gaining ground or losing dominance at different stages of the game. In this regard, Caillois (1967: 150-154) identifies various

pairings, including those of competition–chance which he describes as a fundamental, complementary relationship (see “Nobody Will Laugh” (Crous 2012)) for a more detailed analysis of this binary). At play in “The Hitchhiking Game” is the *mimicry–alea* permutation, where a sequence of events will seem fragmented and illusions will be broken; “the supposed equation between text and world will appear as a mirror image of the latter or a deception practiced by the former” (Iser 1993: 263).

To further refine his theory, Caillois (1967: 119-121; see also Henricks 2010: 177) distinguishes between games of *ludus* and of *paidia* – a continuum along which the former implies a mutually agreed-to, rule-bound environment, while in the latter a creative, spontaneous and self-assertive spirit reigns supreme. Without the element of *paidia*, games become something of a chore, formulaic and sterile, whereas games without sufficient or escalating levels of challenge lack the ludic element, permitting but a basic level of social interaction or engagement. In “The Hitchhiking Game” there are no predetermined rules, (almost) anything goes, therefore a fun and humorous game can easily move into an altogether darker register. In a game without rules, the characters’ play becomes increasingly varied and later falls outside the boundaries of the expected. Yet play is only corrupted or perverted (Caillois 1967: 101-122) when boundaries are transgressed, be it accidentally or deliberately, through a lack of sportsmanship or due to trickery, which means foul play and cheating still qualify as play (p. 38). Only by dismissing the rules as absurd or refusing to participate because the game is senseless, can a player ruin the game. The game is brought into disrepute when obsession overtakes passion, and when greed and winning at all costs are what spur players on (pp. 106-107). Games of chance are perverted when players’ superstitions or self-delusions get the upper hand, so that it is no longer just a question of having luck on your side (pp. 107-111). Games of pretence spiral out of control when players can no longer distinguish between make-believe and reality, or suppress their own identity in favour of the persona they have adopted (pp. 111-112), as is aptly demonstrated by the girl in “The Hitchhiking Game”. Perverted vertigo-inducing play may drive a player to alienate himself from the world, and to seek refuge in drugs and addictive substances as a means of escape (pp. 113-119).

***Laughable Loves*³**

The title *Laughable Loves* toys with the reader's expectations in that it seems to portend that the subject matter will reflect a light-hearted and playful take on relationships, the erotic, or even the sexual. Readers will not be disappointed if they are searching for light-heartedness, since pranks are a principal theme (Misurella 1999: 111). As the title indicates, and Martine Boyer-Weinmann (2009: 57) confirms, Kundera's work is aimed at eliciting laughter from the reader, yet this laughter manifests as a grimace, because what is dissected via these stories are not only mistaken beliefs about the self, but also misunderstandings in respect of characters' relations with others, and of human existence in general. Jocelyn Maixent (1998: 244) warns that the games Kundera's characters play pit them – along with the reader – against their own inadequacies. As will become evident, in the end it is not love itself that is laughable, but the alienation experienced by a lover – or by both lovers (Grenier in Burda n.d.: 3). This brings to mind Kvetoslav Chvatík's (1995: 14) observation that when three of these short stories were first published in the original Czech, the subtitle labelled the tales as three *melancholy* anecdotes.

“The Hitchhiking Game”

Even in a game there lurks a lack of freedom;
even a game is a trap for the players.

– Kundera 1974: 20

“Play is a catalyst”, and the act of playing – essentially a “nonproductive activity” (Brown 2010: 11) – sets in motion a series of events which will have a profound effect on two people's lives. Because play is a primal activity “which proceeds without a complex intellectual framework” (Brown 2010: 15), it is seldom possible to envisage all the potential repercussions of a prank or a joke.

The story commences as a silly, provocative game that immediately draws in both players, but then insidiously gnaws away at their relationship. A young man is travelling in a car with his girlfriend, whose prudishness and reticence he finds charming: “He enjoy[s] her moments of shyness” (Kundera 1974: 4).⁴ On this particular day, while on vacation, as the young

3. For the purposes of this article, the research was based on the ordering of the stories in *Risibles Amours*, the French text, not the English translation by Rappaport, in which the order differs.

4. Subsequent references to “The Hitchhiking Game” in *Laughable Loves* (Kundera 1974) will be indicated by page number(s) only.

man fills the petrol tank, the girl jokingly pretends to be a coquettish and unknown hitchhiker. With time on their hands, as Pat Kane (2005: 200) notes, “free play thrives in the leisure zone”.

To understand the positionality of the two characters prior to the game, it is important to investigate the couple’s existing power relations, as well as their subjective views of themselves and their partner.⁵ Although the girl is “devoted to the young man” and “never had doubts about anything he did, and confidently entrusted every moment of her life to him” (14), she is self-conscious about her body, insecure, with a “shyness that [is] ridiculous and old-fashioned”, fearing that her boyfriend will leave her for someone who is “more attractive and more seductive” (5). In her view, what he desires of her, and which she has been unable to give him, is “light-heartedness, shamelessness and dissoluteness” (14) – this enforced positionality means she sees herself as she imagines he sees her. The young man is confident that he “knows everything that a man could know about women” (4) and hides the fact that although he has never “demonstrated either a particularly strong will or ruthlessness ... he had *longed* to at one time” (10; emphasis in the original) – this is known as selective positionality, i.e., presenting yourself to the world in a particular way. He is “solicitous” (10) in his approach to the girl, whose purity he appreciates, yet he shows clear gender bias by dismissing all other women as “full of all possible thoughts, feelings, and vices” (21) – an ascribed positionality. Without first establishing the points of view and preconceived notions of the young woman and her young man, the unfolding game between two “strangers” would not have the same impact.

The girl playfully thumbs a ride, and the “open-minded orientation” (Henricks 2011: 247) of the young man makes him open the passenger door so that she can get in. He addresses her as “Miss”, thus establishing the two of them as strangers. Each immediately slots into character by assuming a role which conforms to stereotypes – she becomes the daring and provocative hitchhiker; he, the assertive and “overenterprising” (9) driver. Assuming new roles does not imply a complete transformation but rather a “diffusion”, in which there is some overlap between their old and their new identities, requiring constant reinterpretation (Olechnicki 1996: 113) – this forms part of a game’s “dialectical pattern” (Henricks 2011: 247). The girl plays the game by becoming an illusory character and behaving as she imagines that character would, while the young man remains his polite self (for the moment).

Early on in the French version of the text there is an ominous warning that this is typical of the way life unfolds, with a man imagining he is performing

5. We are indebted to one of the reviewers of this article for this insight. See also <<http://feministthoughtHamilton.wikispaces.com/standpoint+and+positionality>> (accessed 26 February 2014).

a role in a certain play, blissfully unaware of the fact that the scenery has been changed (Kundera 1970: 229). A challenge arises from the fact that any play allows for an infinite number of unexpected and unforeseen permutations which cause the unfolding game to transform unceasingly. Both characters in this short story seem to like the idea of a challenge that could send them into uncharted territory, with never-before-encountered experiences and innumerable possible scenarios unfolding.⁶ Now the linear narrative splits in two, in effect, as the players commence living virtual/parallel lives, while putting their old lives on hold.

Such role-play corresponds with *mimicry* (Caillois 1967). The characters improvise by (figuratively speaking) donning masks and “slipping into character” (Chua 1999: 92). The young man and the girl assume different personas diametrically opposed to their true personalities, which allow them to act with impunity, free from any personal, moral or social constraints – as she notes, “a life without shame, without biographical specifications, without past or future, without obligations” (p. 17). Whereas the young man has always been the dominant one in the relationship (ascribed positionality based on gender), he now allows the usually shy and reticent girl to be more sexually assertive and provocative.

Sadly, reality soon invades their make-believe world, allowing the hitherto suppressed (or conventionally regulated) erotic side of their personalities to surface. If this parallel existence were to be represented as two lines, their rapprochement and distancing could be represented as two parallel waves with different undulations, which do not intersect or meet at the same point on a horizontal line, i.e., their “normal” lives. For instance, when the young man compliments the girl she accuses him of lying “because she really believe[s] that her young man enjoy[s] lying to women” (7). The girl feigns nonchalance, reassuring herself: “I don’t know you, so it doesn’t bother me” (7). She thus consciously perpetuates the illusion she has created by designating the young man as “other”.

In this game of smoke and mirrors, the young man finds it easy enough to distinguish between his girlfriend and the persona she has created, but it is not as easy for the girl: “he [is] flattering and flirting with her (an unknown hitchhiker), and *how becoming it [is] to him*” (8; emphasis in the original). Clearly, within this artificial environment, despite acting like strangers neither can hide their true character, their fears or their emotions. When the young man looks at the girl who, in character, snubs him with a snide remark, her “defiant face appear[s] to him to be completely convulsed” (8). When “real life” makes inroads into that magical and enclosed space of the game (Huizinga 1970) it becomes increasingly difficult to continue the charade. In vain, the young man attempts to terminate the game. Most games have relatively set limits in terms of duration, but sadly, in this short story

6. This insight was gleaned from Brown (2010: 34).

the unwillingness of one of the players to continue fails to signal the end of the game. The young man “put[s] his arm around her shoulders and softly sp[eaks] the name which he usually addresse[s] her with and he now want[s] to stop the game” (9). In Iser’s (1993) terms, finality would outplay endlessness. Yet the two protagonists remain out of sync, despite the fact that the girl “[is] sensible and kn[ows] perfectly well that all this [is] merely a game” (9). This realisation reflects the opinions of Kane (2005) and Huizinga (1970) who note that in a game, those who participate voluntarily are conscious of the fact that it is but a game. However, while the girl has the power to put an end to it, her countermove is that she opts to continue, and her stubbornness is the driving force in the text, which foreshadows the possible endlessness of their play.

Neither player sets out any rules beforehand, which is why a problem arises. Where unregimented emotions or behaviours surface, and where the rules are broken – as is usually the case when societal conventions are flaunted – the perpetrators are subjected to sanction (Berne 2008). Because their interpretations of “acceptable play” are completely arbitrary, the rebuffed young man changes tactics in a countermove of his own, but not without bringing a slightly darker, more menacing note to their interaction: “And since the girl insist[s] on continuing in her role, he transfer[s] his anger to the unknown hitchhiker whom she [is] portraying ... [and] he [begins] to play the tough guy who treats women to the coarser aspects of his masculinity: wilfulness, sarcasm, self-assurance” (9-10) – ironically an aspect of his personality which he has always suppressed in his dealings with this girl.

For the time being the girl revels in the game because she experiences a sense of liberation and reveals how ambiguous the notion of identity can be: “It [has] freed her from herself”, she “[has] slipped into this silly, romantic part with an ease that astonishe[s] her and [holds] her spellbound” (10), thus erasing any difference between her actual and her enforced positionality. Her comments reinforce Caillois’s (1967) notion that, in games revolving around *mimicry*, individuals can immerse themselves totally in different roles and behave in a way that differs from their habitual actions, opening up infinite possibilities.

The reader is given a sobering glimpse into the young man’s life, which is largely devoid of possibilities, and presented as one of “compulsory boredom of meetings and home study” (11). In his mind’s eye he sees his existence as menaced, as following the straight and narrow, “a road along which he [is] being pursued, where he [is] visible to everyone, and from which he [cannot] turn aside” (11). Theroux (1974: n.p.) argues that despite no mention is being made of politics in the text itself, it looms over the story like an insidious fatigue – he assumes the couple is behaving like this because their starved imaginations are the result of political frustration. While driving, the young man arrives at an intersection and is literally

speaking at a crossroads of possibilities: he chooses, physically and symbolically, to deviate from the planned and preapproved holiday route (“the shadow of precise planning”; “he needed a recommendation from his office” (11)) in favour of novelty and the unknown:

The sports car [is] moving away not only from the imaginary goal of Banská Bystrica, but also from the real goal, towards which it ha[s] been heading in the morning Fiction [is] suddenly making an assault upon real life. The young man [is] moving away from himself and from the implacable straight road, from which he ha[s] never strayed until now.

(12)

The young man not only crosses a geographical boundary by changing direction, but also a psychological line, in that by taking a risk and allowing the game to unfold as it will, he surrenders to fate (cf. Caillois (1967) on *alea*). When the couple arrives at their new hotel, the young man abandons his persona: “Out of the car he [is], of course, himself again” (13), i.e., play is relegated to that world which is separate, apart, inside the car – his second attempt to bring a definitive end to the game.

The young woman momentarily steps out of character, but is tempted to continue with the farce, since being “this other woman, this irresponsible, indecent other woman, one of those women of whom she [is] so jealous” brings “light-heartedness, shamelessness, and dissoluteness” (14) – a chance to explore the darker side of her potentiality, to ascribe to herself a more dominant role within their relationship.

Unfortunately, the girl’s penchant for games is not shared by the young man: “something was beginning to irritate him about the girl’s game” (15). So good an actress is she that he believes it is not only her words which have kept up the pretence, but that “her *whole persona* ha[s] changed, the movements of her body and her facial expression” (15; emphasis in the original) and he finds himself disgusted by it. “It irritate[s] the young man more and more how *well able* the girl [is] to become the lascivious miss. If she [is] able to do it so well, he [thinks], it mean[s] that she really *is* like that” (16; emphasis in the original). Truth and fiction become blurred as the characters find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between reality and illusion, between dissimulation and truth (cf. Caillois (1967) on *mimicry*). The young man begins a process of cyclical questioning: “Perhaps the girl suppose[s] that by means of the game she [is] *disowning* herself, but [is]n’t it the other way around? [Is]n’t she becoming herself only through the game? [Is]n’t she freeing herself through the game?” (16; emphasis in the original). He questions the girl’s new positionality, wondering whether she is in fact merely making visible something which has been hidden. The girl remains blissfully unaware of the irony of his thoughts, as this is indeed what is happening. She has been rejuvenated and liberated by the game, while the young man, who has identified this new-found sense of self and

awakening in the girl, is keen to stop their play despite his initial enthusiasm. Calling an immediate halt to the game, for him, would mean a return to the surety of established notions of who and what his girlfriend is to him and within their relationship – to re-establish the former balance of power in their couple, and also to undo the image of her that is now festering in his mind. While he yearns for a return to the way things have been, the girl has discovered the power she holds as a woman and as someone with a desirable body: “as the hitchhiker, [she] could do anything, *everything [is] permitted her*. She could say, do, and feel whatever she like[s]” (17; emphasis in the original). When a patron at the restaurant propositions her, she capitalises on her new-found sensuality by flaunting it. She seems to give in to the temptation of fame-seeking – an aspect of play which Huizenga failed to highlight, but which Caillois (1967: 33) picked up on, namely to deliberately play to an audience. The young man’s mental anguish centres around the archetypal virgin/whore dichotomy – his whole being is paradoxically attracted and repulsed by the girl: “The more the girl with[draws] from him *psychically*, the more he long[s] for her *physically*” (16; emphasis in the original). When she leaves the room to go and “piss” (17), despite resorting to uncharacteristically crude language she is buoyed by the realisation that the game is beginning to fascinate her, that she is being swamped by “a *feeling of happy-go-lucky irresponsibility*” (17; emphasis in the original). The game allows her to assume a persona which is diametrically opposite to her own – that of a woman who is sexually assertive and comfortable in her own skin: she has experienced the anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding and strength which flow from mastering a game.

“It [is] a curious game ... the young man, even though he himself [is] playing the unknown driver remarkably well, [does] not for a moment stop seeing his girl in the hitchhiker” (18). This is ironic, because the young woman does not see herself in the same way she did at the start of the game. When reality intrudes on make-believe it makes transparent that which the other is attempting to hide. The young man loses patience; the girl has pushed the limits of the game, and from that point on the downward spiral of their mutual alienation spills over into their conversations and actions which become increasingly crude and disrespectful.

Kundera is known to frequently interrupt the narrative in his works to “impart a bit of philosophy, autobiography, or psychological conjecture” (Kimball 1986: n.p.), and this short story is no exception. The voice of the anonymous narrator chimes in to comment on this make-believe scenario:

But there is no escape from a game. A team cannot flee from the playing field before the end of the match, chess pieces cannot desert the chessboard: the boundaries of the playing field are fixed.

(20)

Although she refers to her “dazed soul”, the girl wishes to immerse herself fully in the game, and “narcotically [sinks] deeper into it” (20). This tendency to lose oneself in the immediate experience, to confront destructive yet extreme emotions in a quest for escape or exhilaration, corresponds with *ilinx* (cf. Caillois 1967) – this, in turn, aligns with Iser’s (1993) view that *ilinx* subverts, in this instance, any attempt at clear and lucid thinking.

By contrast, the young man is in full command of his senses. Once they are in their hotel room he looks the girl in the eye in an attempt to see those “familiar features which he love[s] tenderly” (21), desperate to establish a point of honest contact. Sadly, he concludes that in his girlfriend, as in all other women, there is “faithfulness and unfaithfulness, treachery and innocence, flirtatiousness and chastity” (21). Repulsed, he humiliates her: when he offers her money to sleep with him, she accepts – just as a prostitute might. He refuses to kiss her on the lips, stating that he reserves that intimacy for the woman he loves – just as a committed lover might do. He brusquely orders her to undress. In the process of taking off her clothes the girl realises that stripping away the layers is a way of peeling off the mask she has been wearing, “she ha[s] also stripped away her dissimulation, and being naked mean[s] that she [is] now herself So she [stands] naked in front of the young man and at this moment stop[s] playing the game” (23). The girl erroneously believes the young man will also abandon his role-play, but what she fails to grasp is that she cannot make and then impose the rules as and when she pleases – her timing is out, and if there had been no rules to begin with, she cannot at this stage expect him to play by her rules: “But the young man [doesn’t] come to her and [doesn’t] end the game” (23). The players are even more out of sync than before, despite their physical proximity. The young man treats the girl like a prostitute, indulging in dirty talk and objectifying her body. They have sex; harsh, uncompromising. The young woman’s attempts at playfully mimicking the kind of woman he supposedly desires, have irrevocably changed the way the young man views her – an enforced positionality which she has brought on herself.

Paradoxically, when the girl is naked, at her most vulnerable and most likely to show her true colours, despite knowing that “the game [is] over ... [the young man] [doesn’t] feel like returning to their customary relationship. He fear[s] this return” (25). It is precisely the exceptionalist nature of play (Henricks 2011: 225) which sets it apart from humdrum work, causing “players [to] find their return to profane life stressful and tiresome” (p. 164). When the game becomes much more appealing than facing the reality of life it is like a drug, a state of addiction in which there is little room for healthy, normal relationships. Or, having caught a glimpse of what the other player is capable of, it might be preferable to dissociate from life itself, in favour of the make-believe state. As for the girl, being sexually and emotionally liberated by pushing or eroding the boundaries of convention has brought

with it a sense of power: “she ha[s] never known such pleasure, never known so much pleasure as at this moment – beyond that boundary” (25). When a game is a playful way of testing the limits (of a relationship, of possibilities, of love), then it is seldom easy to go back to a life that is predictable, limited and unchallenging. Emotionally speaking, the game has evoked a self-awareness in the couple which pits them against each other, rather than reinforcing their bond – an example of Iser’s (1993) notion of instrumental and free play always being at loggerheads within the text.

After sex, the young man avoids physical contact with the girl, who moves closer, saying his name and whispering reassurances, in a mirror scene to his reassurances earlier in the story when he put his arm around her shoulders and softly said her name. Physical intimacy has not evoked the visceral intimacy the girl yearns for. By crying and repeating “I am me, I am me” (25) she has abandoned all pretence and role-play. However, in discovering hitherto suppressed aspects of her personality she is no longer the person she was at the start of the journey. She is now more fully herself, but is that what the young man truly yearns for? It is exactly through the omniscient narrator sensing “in scenes either during or intimately related to the sexual act” that the characters give some clues of their “innermost concerns and desires” (Sturdivant 1985: 131). To highlight the characters’ alienation, Kimball (1986: n.p.) notes that Kundera’s “depictions of sex are edged with a loneliness and even desperation”, which he refers to as “intimacy in distress”, “that brand of emotionally distanced, often farcical, eroticism” where “what we see is sex in the service of power, betrayal, diversion, or despair, only very rarely in the service of affection or genuine intimacy”. The girl now hungers for that deeper connection, for their old lives to run in tandem again. Kundera’s suggestion that “erotic intimacy promises a real, if already threatened, refuge for individuality in the modern world” is not applicable here – in fact, as readers will discover when reading the other stories in this anthology, “sex is generally a rather chilly, dehumanizing event, an exercise that offers precious little refuge” (Kimball 1986: n.p.). Despite the girl’s pleas, her play-acting has been so convincing that it is almost impossible for the young man to differentiate between her true character and her persona. The image she mirrors to him is what he now assumes to be authentic, and he abhors it. Linking this to the world of theatre, Kimball (1986: n.p.) explains that “the lives of [Kundera’s] characters become a theatre in which a wounded individuality, half capitulating to forces inimical to it, struggles to preserve itself”.

Both the young man and the girl are now conscious that the game is over, but it cannot be undone. Interestingly enough, the end of the story seems to contradict Caillois’s (1967) notion that, fundamentally, it is possible to annul the outcome of a game. Caillois overlooked the fact that, once played, the game cannot be “unplayed” even though the results may be nullified.

Are these characters paying the price for not spelling out the rules beforehand, or for becoming too immersed in the game?

The young man is clearly someone who enjoys pushing the boundaries – of state sanction when he deviates from the predetermined route, and of socially assigned aggressive/submissive roles – but he is less likeable when he loses perspective and shows himself incapable of laughing at and enjoying a fantasy scenario. It seems, therefore, that the joke is on him. In these paradoxes, the couple hold up a mirror to their relationship, but the images are distorted by their preconceived notions of who the other wants them to be.

The girl attempts to prove her bravery by shelving her prudishness and exploring more daring possibilities (Brown 2010) within what she considers to be the safe confines of a make-believe world. She throws herself fully into the game – “she want[s] him to be completely hers, and she completely his” (5) – and, as life would often have it, probably pays dearly for it. For her, love truly is “a losing game”. Her boyfriend, on the other hand, is always more of an unwilling participant and spectator, not fully committed to this game, and he is therefore able to leave the battlefield with relatively few scars.

What will happen to their partnership? As Berne (2008) warns, games of the second degree (which is where this short story can be categorised) can remain private, yet have devastating consequences for the players – and in this instance, it seems unlikely that there will be a happy outcome for the couple. In pushing the limits, they discover a different side to their personalities, but the experience does not constitute or encourage mutual growth. The ending of the short story is ambivalent but, as Anaya Baker (2011: n.p.) notes, three possible scenarios could unfold: the couple could continue as before, pretending that nothing has happened. However, it is likely that if it survived the remainder of the two-week-long holiday, their relationship would be destined to be unhealthy and destructive from then on – which confirms the circular and repetitive aspect of a game. Where elements of *alea* and *mimicry* structure the plot, the endgame or final outcome becomes peripheral and “endlessness outplays finality” (Iser 1993: 264). The fact that thirteen days of their holiday remain might be an omen for the superstitious, and could foreshadow further misery and dissonance as direct ramifications of the couple’s actions on day one. Alternately, they could part ways and start new relationships in which the same game, although in different permutations, might figure once again. A third possibility is that they could form a true union and emerge stronger as a couple, “rather than toying with the illusion of it through games and play” (Baker 2011: n.p.). When the girl indulges in free play she has no particular goal in mind, and revels in the to-and-fro motion of the exchanges between her and the young man. The pay-off for playing the game is that it empowers her, but it has potentially ruined a much-valued relationship.

Has Cohen's observation come true in that lessons have been learnt and healing has occurred? Perhaps not for this couple. The loves which the title of the anthology hints at become laughable for the mere fact that "it is not the laughter elicited by a funny situation, but rather the near hysterical laughter evoked by a sense of loss" (Hattingh 1995: 105). Herselman Hattingh describes the reader's understanding of this ironic laughter as follows:

One comes to see, in the moment of irony, that whatever had been deemed serious, cannot be serious. But the laughter we are forced into with this recognition is not careless, but filled with care for what had been lost – precisely what had been lost had been dear to us. It was dear to us by virtue of the fact that it provided the ground on which we stood. Laughter, in this sense, robs us of any firm footing.

(Hattingh 1995: 104-105)

Conclusion

As Eva Le Grand (1995: 21) highlights, the majority of Kundera's characters oscillate between two attitudes, snared in perpetual yet unproductive motion, and this short story is no different.

This reading of "The Hitchhiking Game" has used the lens of Caillois's games theory to show how Kundera employs *mimicry* to depict a game of role-play between a young man and a young woman. Using Iser's writings on textual games, this article has shown how instrumental as well as free play could work to expose that which was hidden by means of pretence, and could work against transparency to create even greater uncertainty (the *mimicry-alea* binary).

Further research could highlight how Kundera's other characters play games, and how he invites the reader to follow clues in his structuring of the anthology, thus enabling them to discover the textual games he plays in his other short stories and even his novels. It would be worthwhile to investigate whether Kundera's playful approach is as strongly evident in his other works, and whether the emotional counterpoints between laughter and pathos figure as clearly. His focus on the games men and women play in their intimate (and other) relationships remains fascinating. In this respect, "The Hitchhiking Game" demonstrates that Kundera is a master of the textual game.

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