KAFKA’S PRAGUE: FILM AND FICTION

“Everyone is wrong about the future. Man can only be certain about the present moment… But is that quite true either? … the mind [is] always myopic about what goes on, with no reason or logic, down below: two great armies are battling to the death over sacred causes; but some minuscule plague bacterium comes along and lays them both low.” (Milan Kundera, Ignorance, italics not in the original, 2000)

“One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. … ‘What’s happened to me, he thought. It was no dream. His room, a proper room for a human being, only somewhat too small, lay quietly between the four well-known walls.” (Franz Kafka, The Metamorphosis, 1915)

“… I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me. Then I had this vision. It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of existence.” (Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea, 1938)

“I believe that every moment in a film, every word and every reaction, should carry psychological truth. It may be embedded in a very imaginative and fanciful frame, but anything that you hear and see on the screen must be humanly convincing. If you try to cheat with behavioral and motivational implausibilities, the audience will always see through it and you will lose them.” (Milos Forman, Turnaround, 1994)

Classes held Online TTH 1:00-4:15 pm
Dates Session B: June 29 - July 31, 2020
Instructor Dr. Karen von Kunes
Office hours Over Zoom, after class and by appointment
E-mail karen.vonkunes@yale.edu and cell phone at request

COURSE DESCRIPTION

An introduction to Prague’s intellectual culture and the Jewish question through contemporary film, fiction, history, language, online sightseeing, and students’ film projects (screenwriting and intro to logistics of making short films). Virtual traveling in the Czech Republic and selected countries of former Austro-Hungary (Vienna, Budapest, Piran, and Trieste) will be an opportunity for students to familiarize with different cultures and write their observations based on additional research. Emphasis will be on Kafka's influence on today's Prague; visits of Prague synagogues and additional cultural monuments will be virtual. The Holocaust period will be studied in class and through a guest lecture, as well as through virtual visiting the Terezín concentration camp. Topics on Communist state, dissident movement, transition from totalitarianism to democracy, and current multi-ethnic globalism will be covered and discussed through assigned novels readings and films viewing and discussed in class. Works will include analyzing films by Miloš Forman (Loves of a Blond, Firemen's Ball), Jan Kadár (Shop on the Main Street), Jan Svěrák (Kolya), Jan Hřebejk (Divided We Fall), Jiří Menzel (Closely Watched Trains) and readings by Franz Kafka, Holocaust writer Arnošt Lustig, Bohumil Hrabal, Milan
Kundera, and Václav Havel. One or two guest lectures will be led by cinematographers Josef Lustig and Gary Griffin. Each student will complete a creative screenplay (or another project of his or her choice, such as short story, theater play, etc.), and a final course essay based on the materials studied in class.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

The seminar consists of discussion lectures and student participation. Each week on Friday students e-submit a one-page (please, only one page—up to 350 words) response-short essay based on the assigned reading and/or film viewing, which will count for 25% of the final grade. Additional grading is based on Zoom class participation 25% (absences have to be justified), and 25% writing a midterm screenplay or short story/theater play (7-8 pages), and 25% final paper (8-10 pages). Readings and screenings are in English, and students should access films and books online.

STRUCTURE

Each Zoom class discussion is initiated by the instructor, and gradually taken over by students with the instructor functioning as a coach. Readings include all novels and viewing all the films on the syllabus and the additional materials that should be accessed electronically. Students are expected to complete the reading of the assigned work or viewing the film before the class during which it is discussed. If for a serious reason, a student is unable to finish the work, he or she should inform the instructor prior to class discussion by e-mail.

ONLINE ACCESS

Seminars and in-class participation will take place over Zoom. The films for each week will be uploaded to Box@Yale for students to watch them remotely. Screenings are planned before each class in which the films are discussed. Clips will be reviewed in class during discussion. Required novels should be accessible in e-form through (free) planetebook.com, or additional sites. Additional required materials will be available on Canvas.

For the midterm, students will write a creative piece, either a film script (5-7 pages) or possibly a short story or a play. Materials and practice how to write creatively will be provided on canvas and discussed in class. The final essay will consist of analysis of 3+ works discussed in class, based on a common topic with a strongly presented and defended thesis on which the paper is to be based. It should include the brief historical and/or political background and a bibliography of existing scholarship.

Personal integrity and academic honesty are the key component to education, and the strength of the university environment. Plagiarism is taken seriously and consequence are dire while at Yale and even past college education. If you take ideas from another person or source, you must acknowledge its author and the title of the source, including page numbers. Please review Yale’s Academic Integrity Policy:

http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduate-regulations/policies/definitions-plagiarism-cheating/
READINGS (reading to be completed before each class to be discussed in class)
Franz Kafka, *The Trial* [https://www.kafka-online.info/the-trial.html](https://www.kafka-online.info/the-trial.html)
Arnošt Lustig’s short story “Tanga” will be provided by the instructor
Bohumil Hrabal, *I Served the King of England*
Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*
Václav Havel, play *Largo Desolato*
Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*
Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*
Paul Argentini, *Elements of Style for Screenwriters* (a reference guide)
Peter Demetz’s *Prague in Black and Gold* excerpts will be provided online
Additional materials (criticism, journal articles, etc.) will be provided online

FILMS (to be watched before each class to be discussed in class)
Jan Kadár and Elmar Klos: *The Shop on Main Street*
Jiří Menzel: *Closely Watched Trains*
Jan Hřebejk: *Divided We Fall*
Jiří Menzel: *I Served the King of England* (if available)
Miloš Forman: *Loves of a Blond*
Miloš Forman: *Firemen’s Ball*
Philip Kaufman: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*
Jan Svěrák: *Kolja*

Additional assignments will include virtually exploring assigned (and optional) histories of Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Piran and Trieste to get a better picture of cultural heritage of Central Europe. Each student can focus on the area of his/her interest, such as architecture, painting, etc. A brief presentation of virtually visited cities within students’ topics of interest will be presented by each student in class.

THE CLASS-BY-CLASS SYLLABUS

1st week

**Class 1**  
**Tuesday, June 30**
Introduction to culture/history of the Czech Republic and its current position within the European Union. Overview of former Czechoslovakia & Austro-Hungary Empire. Position of Franz Kafka within the Czech culture, the tragedy of Holocaust and formation of the communist state in 1948, its 40-year domination resulting in the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Intro to Kafka’s life and work. Discussion of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, its literary value, meaning, blend of surrealism with effects of realness, the novel’s interpretations within our current society. Reasons for this short novel remaining one of the most read books. A close-up examination of Kafka’s writing style and translators’ liberty.
Class 2  Thursday, July 2
Discussion of Kafka’s *The Trial*, and his existential approach to writing; visiting online of his Prague residences, Café Louvre where he discussed his writing with Max Brod. Meaning of Josef K.’s journey. Structure of the novel. Impact of *The Trial* on international literary scene. Homework assignment is to research synagogues in Old Town Square and former Jewish Ghetto and visit Old Jewish cemetery.

2nd week  
Class 3  Tuesday, July 7
The Holocaust period studied. Discussing film *Shop on the Main Street*, by Slovak director Jan Kadár about the deportation of Jews to Terezin. Impressions from virtual visit of Terezín Ghetto. Additional material will be posted online. Discussing Arnošt Lustig’s story “Tanga”: Tanga’s strength in Terezin as a prostitute, her impact on the narrator’s vision and perception.

Class 4  Thursday, July 9
Discussing Jiří Menzel’s classic: *Closely Watched Trains*. Analysis of the war theme mingled with Czech subversive humor and film characters’ erotic desire. Culmination of Czech idleness into an act of political courage against the Nazis. Our Holocaust period is ending with Jan Hřebejk’s film *Divided We Fall*. Comparing cinematic elements of the three war-time films: directors’ vision and cinematic approach, actors’ performance, directors’ perception of historical upheavals influenced by generational gap among film directors.

3rd week  
Class 5  Tuesday, July 14
Analysis of Bohumil Hrabal’s surrealist novel *I Served the King of England*. His approach to pre-war, war & post-war times in Czech lands, Sudetenland and in Europe. An anti-hero going through historical periods with optimism and congruence with nature and everything that surrounds him. Clips from the film of the same title made by Jiří Menzel (unless we could obtain and watch his whole surrealistic film).

Class 6  Thursday, July 16
Intro to Czech New Wave. Milos Forman’s cinematic vision in his Czech classic *Loves of a Blonde*, and his allegory: *Firemen’s Ball*. Study films composition and structure, non-actors’ acting, use of dialogues, surprises and climaxes relying on Forman’s approaches to screenwriting, camera angles, colors, and choice of details. Introduction to general screenwriting and how screenplay composition differs from story playwriting and story writing. Guest lecture on aspects of screenplay writing and actual making a short film based on a screenplay will be virtually introduced by actual filmmakers. Students will be presenting ideas on their screenplay.
4th week
Class 7 Tuesday, July 21
Midterm papers draft (mainly the idea/structure of your own screenplay or a story, which will be 5-7 pages long) by midnight on Monday, July 20. Students’ idea will be presented during class and after receiving comments for improvement by the instructor and the guest filmmakers, the final screenplay (or story) will be submitted by Wednesday night, July 22. Guest lecture continues on aspects of the actual making a short film based on students’ screenplay ideas will be virtually continued by actual filmmakers. Each student presents ideas on his/her screenplay.

Class 8 Thursday, July 23
Communist system introduced. Studying the Post-Warsaw Pact period in Czechoslovakia: Václav Havel as a dissident playwright. Discussing his work Disturbing the Peace with focusing on his struggle and literary achievements during the period of Normalization (1970s and 1980s). Covering Václav Havel’s political, economic and artistic views, and discussing his play Largo Desolato as a piece documenting his time as a political prisoner, leading to his becoming first post-Communist President of Czechoslovakia.

5th week
Class 9 Tuesday, July 28
Discussing Milan Kundera’s classic The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Parmenides’s idea to lightness/weight and Nietzsche’s doctrine of the Eternal Return, the metaphor of Grand March, role of misunderstanding, the author's meditation on kitsch, the political canvas of the novel and its characters’ development and search for meaning in life. Compare with Philip Kaufman’s film The Unbearable Lightness of Being of the same title: the leitmotif of predestination, the vertigo of weakness, use of film techniques, “the unbearable long/ness of the film.” The role and function of Beethoven’s music in the novel.

Last class
Class 10 Thursday, July 30
The history turns around: discussing Jan Svěrák’s film Kolja to conclude the period of Soviet occupation and renewed hope in the Velvet and post-Velvet Revolution times. Discussing Milan Kundera’s novel Ignorance: emigration and home return in the view of Odysseus’s journey. Issues of the subconscious, memories, illusions, revenge, and ideas of forgetting. Influence of Kafka and Freud. The everlasting impact of European history on Kundera’s fiction, and his return to it.

Final Papers due on Friday, July 28 by midnight. While the topic is free, it is necessary to cover several works studied during the course, preferably using subsidiary works as well. The final paper should be 8-10 pages long.