

Unbearably Kitsch

The Unbearable Lightness of Being, directed by Stephen Kaufman. Showing at Hoyts nationally. Reviewed by Jane Skelton.

In Stephen Kaufman's *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Daniel Day Lewis, looking very different from the tough blond cockney role in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, cruises the pale corridors of hospitals and bath houses in pursuit of his major interest — women.

Like the book by Milan Kundera on which it is based, the film's major preoccupation is with love relationships. The backdrop is Prague in the '60s, with its anti-fun communist officials. We are shown the thunderous tanks of Soviet occupation, public resistance, and the weary march of people fleeing the country.

Tomas and his two lovers, Tereza and Sabina, represent states of "being" in relation to their country. To Tereza, life is heavy and Czechoslovakia, which she describes as "the country of the weak", is where she must belong. Tomas' life is unbearably light. He is at first irresponsible and flighty; later he chooses heaviness, returns to his country, where he is not permitted to work again as a doctor and finds himself cleaning windows for influential people. Sabina, an artist, is the epitome of lightness, and her choice of freedom is unbearable.

In the book, Kundera put it this way:

If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make.

To Kundera, the heavier the burden, "the closer our lives come to



the earth, the more real and truthful they become". The absence of a burden causes "man" to "be lighter than air ... become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant".

So which is better, lightness or heaviness? Lightly, Tomas writes an article for a newspaper comparing the Czech communists with Oedipus. When Oedipus discovered he had slept with his mother and killed his

father, and had thus brought ruin on his country, he put out his eyes. Except, the communists say, we didn't know, we were misled. They didn't take responsibility. Following the Soviet occupation, Tomas is suspect and is asked to retract the article. (Officials tell him, come now, as a doctor, surely you don't want us to put out our eyes?) When Tomas refuses to retract the article, he becomes heavy. He is no longer allowed to work as a doctor. As time

goes by, however, he becomes lighter — his job as a window cleaner relieves him of responsibilities.

The intricacies of the lightness/heaviness theme is not explained in the film. I doubt that anyone seeing the film who hasn't read the book would guess the meaning of the title.

Another theme in the film is that of "kitsch". Kundera tells us in his book that "kitsch" is a German word which has entered all Western languages. He says its original metaphysical meaning "is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence".

In the film Sabina says to her lover Franz that "everywhere music is becoming noise". Banality conquers all. Dissent is suppressed. Kundera sees kitsch as "the essential ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements". To Kundera, political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on "the fantasies, images, words, and archetypes that come together to make up this or that *political kitsch*". To Sabina, Tomas is "the opposite of kitsch". She says to him that "... in the kingdom of kitsch, you would be a monster".

Sabina's horror of kitsch, of the "grand march" of "the raised fist", is similar to Tereza's nightmare/fantasy of other women at the swimming pool suddenly appearing naked. In the book there are corpses floating just below the surface of the water — the dream is reminiscent of a holocaust scene of the extermination of Jews. In the film, Tereza's vision of the naked, exercising women is part of the "erotica".

A literary adaptation to film is always a problem. The result rarely seems to be satisfying. This film opts for "lightness" — the issues in Kundera's book are superficially dealt with, their significance obscured.

The film is marketed for its "erotica". It is described as "a lovers' story". The advertising shows Sabina in sexy underwear posed above a mirror. This is accurate enough.

inasmuch as the film's "erotica" pivots around the woman's body as image of desire. It is wearisome, contrived stuff. Fragments of women's bodies coyly beckon; the

missionary position reigns supreme. In short, the film's "erotica" is extremely kitsch.

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New Directions

ANZUS: Australia's Predicament in the Nuclear Age, Joseph A. Camilleri. (MacMillan, 1988.) \$19.95.

Pine Gap: Australia and the US Geostationary Signals Intelligence Satellite Programme, Desmond Ball. (Allen & Unwin, 1988.) \$9.95.

Reviewed by Peter Jones.

If the peace movement has achieved nothing else it has certainly raised public consciousness on issues pertaining to the nuclear arms race. There is now a market for books on subjects that previously would have been ignored: the victims of a deliberate bipartisan campaign to maintain a blanket of secrecy over both the long-term implications of the ANZUS Alliance signed in 1951 and the details of US bases in this country like Pine Gap.

Most Australians still seem to think that ANZUS is concerned with US support for Australia in the event of an external threat, although the government has always pointed out that this is not the case. Joe Camilleri sets out to look at the historical origins of ANZUS, and consider the arguments for and against the alliance. He then examines how the whole significance of ANZUS has changed with the evolution of US global and nuclear strategy — although the Australian public has never been encouraged to understand these developments.

Now that the heady days of the great marches are past, the peace movement is moving on to look at defence alternatives for Australia outside the ANZUS framework. Joe

Camilleri explores some of these options, reflecting a similar school of thought now growing in Europe as the peace movement there begins to explore non-nuclear and non-provocative defence for a Europe beyond the blocs. Pacifists go one step further, with a strategy of disarmament that moves through non-alignment and non-provocative defence to social defence in conjunction with more emphasis on international conflict resolution using negotiation, arbitration and Third Party mediation.

In the meantime, it is important that the peace movement continues to focus on the demand for the removal of all US bases, principally because the process of dealignment or an Australia beyond the blocs will mean an end to all foreign bases on Australian soil. We must be grateful to Des Ball for doing more than anyone else in Australia to lift the cloak of secrecy on the US bases in Australia even though, in his latest book on the subject, he calls for the Australian public to support Pine Gap. There are several more detailed articles refuting the arguments used by Des Ball to justify Pine Gap.

Principally, they point out that when Pine Gap was built there were no arms control agreements to verify; and that Australia should take part in international verification procedures through an international agreement and not simply on behalf of the United States. As for the other functions of Pine Gap, we can only speculate as no one will tell us what they are. The likelihood is that they are nothing to do with verification and if we did know what they were about, we would not want them.

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