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## Adapting a novel by Milan Kundera into a screenplay

The art of adaptation is often underrated and underappreciated in the world of film. However, adaptation is as difficult as language translation, and it requires a thorough understanding of the original work, the motives of the author, and the aesthetics necessary to successfully bring the work to the screen.

Over the course of the year, I am going to adapt Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1996) into a screenplay ready for production. When reading this book in a course on Eastern European literature I realized that the structure of the novel was less like that of a traditional novel and more like a film. The book is divided up into short stories, some of which have recurring characters and is driven far more by themes and philosophical musings than it is by action and character development. The novel is mostly set in Czechoslovakia in the late sixties, and through the characters Kundera explores the ideas of forgetting, desire, and the meaning of laughter. The private thoughts and desires of the characters are contrasted and compared with the politics of the country, as well as with Kundera's personal experiences as a blacklisted intellectual in Czechoslovakia.

The structure of the book reminded me very much of the work of some of my favorite directors, including Todd Hayes, Dusan Makavejev, and Ang Lee. In Hayes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) a non-linear, multi-faceted storyline is supported by extensive quasi-philosophical narration while Hayes' *I'm Not There* (2008) and Makavejev's *Sweet Movie* (2007) and *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (2007) artfully weave together multiple storylines to create a cohesive piece. I will, in particular, be studying the way that Hayes breaks the fourth wall in order to explore the characters' interiors. Lee's

*Brokeback Mountain* (2005) is another source I will study to understand how to delve into a character's mind without resorting to narration. I will also be looking at films that focus heavily on sex, as this is an important theme in Kundera's work. I plan to look at some pornographic art films, in particular the works of Radley Metzger, in order to gain a better understanding of how to incorporate explicit sex into a film. I will also look at less explicit sex-based films such as Steven Soderburgh's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989) and Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007) to get a feel for how these directors write about the mental and emotional problems that sex can cause. Through these sources I will learn how to tackle intangible sections of Kundera's novel.

Initially I plan to focus mainly on understanding *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, since a thorough understanding of the themes, characters, and style of the book are necessary. I will also need to read historical and literary texts in order to fully understand the political scene of Czechoslovakia in the sixties as well as the author's place within it. From there I will begin to formulate how I want to adapt the film. After that point I will write the actual screenplay, drawing on my previous research as well as feedback from my thesis committee. My goal is to reach the end of the year with a completed, seriously re-worked screenplay that brings Kundera's thematically-heavy novel into a film which manages to express these themes without losing its cinematic drive.

